

Origin Narratives: Reading and Reverence in Late-Ming China

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ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation, I examine a genre of commercially-published, illustrated hagiographical books. Recounting the life stories of some of China's most beloved cultural icons, from Confucius to Guanyin, I term these hagiographical books "origin narratives" (*chushen zhuan* 出身傳). Weaving a plethora of legends and ritual traditions into the new "vernacular" *xiaoshuo* format, origin narratives offered comprehensive portrayals of gods, sages, and immortals in narrative form, and were marketed to a general, lay readership. Their narratives were often accompanied by additional materials (or "paratexts"), such as worship manuals, advertisements for temples, and messages from the gods themselves, that reveal the intimate connection of these books to contemporaneous cultic reverence of their protagonists. The content and composition of origin narratives reflect the extensive range of possibilities of late-Ming *xiaoshuo* narrative writing, challenging our understanding of reading. I argue that origin narratives functioned as entertaining and informative encyclopedic sourcebooks that consolidated all knowledge about their protagonists, from their hagiographies to their ritual traditions.

Origin narratives also alert us to the hagiographical substrate in late-imperial literature and religious practice, wherein widely-revered figures played multiple roles in the culture. The reverence of these cultural icons was constructed through the relationship between what I call the *Three Ps*: their personas (and life stories), the practices surrounding their lore, and the places associated with them (or "sacred geographies"). In this dissertation, I explore this dynamic through the prism of origin narratives by focusing on the immortal Xu Xun 許遜, the god

Zhenwu 真武, and the immortal bard Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓. I conclude with a case study of a recurrent theme in origin narratives: the protagonist's journey through hell.

The main goal of this dissertation is to examine the pivotal yet overlooked genre of origin narratives and unveil its significance to Chinese literature and cultural practice. What was the reading experience of origin narratives? What spurred their rise and commercial success in late Ming? And what was their long-term impact on writing and worship in late-imperial China? To answer these questions, this dissertation attempts to transcend anachronistic disciplinary boundaries that obscure the realities of life in late Ming China, and instead explore origin narratives within the broader cultural framework that informed their production and consumption during this period. Therefore, I analyze origin narratives in conjunction with a wide range of materials that fall into the realms of literature, religion, and history. These include literary works, canonical texts, popular religious tracts (*baojuan* and *shanshu*), daily-life encyclopedias, local gazetteers, geographical compendia, pictorial hagiographies, and art works.

Origin narratives reflect three concomitant trends in late-Ming book culture: a renewed interest in hagiographies, a penchant for anthologizing in commercial publishing, and the multiple roles *xiaoshuo* narratives played in the culture. In their hybrid composition and encyclopedic scope, origin narratives are a unique late-Ming phenomenon that opens a rare window onto the interplay between literature and religion during this transformative period in the history of Chinese culture.

Contents

List of Figures	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Late Ming Origin Narratives	33
Chapter 2: The Filial Immortal Xu Xun and Late Ming Print Culture	92
Chapter 3: Exorcistic Journeys: The Travels of the Warrior God Zhenwu	166
Chapter 4: The Immortal’s Voice: the “Autobiographical” Jottings of Lü Dongbin	229
Chapter 5: Through the Gates of Hell: Netherworld Journeys in Origin Narratives	273
Conclusion	320
Bibliography.....	331
Appendix: Table of Origin Narratives	360

List of Figures

1.	Xu Xun fighting the dragon, from <i>The Iron Tree</i>	33
2.	The first page of the <i>Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North</i>	35
3.	The first page of the <i>Tale of the Eight Immortals</i>	35
4.	A page from <i>Shishi yuanliu</i>	40
5.	A porcelain cup featuring the Eight Immortals from the Jiajing period (1522-1566), housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York	41
6.	A seventeenth-century statuette of the Eight Immortals surrounding the god of longevity, housed at the British Museum	41
7.	The opening page of the <i>renji men</i> volume in the <i>Santai wanyong zhengzong</i> ...	47
8.	The opening page of the <i>sengdao men</i> volume in the same encyclopedia	47
9.	Xu Xun fights the Sinful Dragon of Poyang Lake, from <i>The Iron Tree</i>	86
10.	Xu Xun and his disciples erect the Iron Tree, from <i>The Iron Tree</i>	90
11.	Xu Xun erects the Iron Tree, from <i>Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan</i>	122
12.	The birth of Xu Xun; plate 8 in <i>Zhenxian shiji</i>	123
13.	Xu Xun and his acolytes fight the dragon; plate 68 in <i>Zhenxian shiji</i>	124
14.	Xu Xun oversees the erection of the Iron Tree; plate 92 in <i>Zhenxian shiji</i>	124
15.	Xu Xun ascends to heaven; plate 110 in <i>Zhenxian shiji</i>	125
16.	A portrait of Xu Xun in <i>The Iron Tree</i>	128
17.	An eighteenth-century statue of Zhenwu, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	138
18.	A worship timetable, the appendix of <i>Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North</i>	148

19.	A list of offerings, the appendix of <i>Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North</i>	148
20.	Illustration and description of Mount Wudang in <i>Sancai tuhui</i>	174
21.	Illustration and description of Mount Wudang in <i>Hainei qiguan</i>	176
22.	A “Mount Wudang” temple altar at the Beiji dian 北極殿, Tainan, Taiwan	181
23.	Pages from Guanyin’s journey through hell in <i>The Origin and Cultivation</i>	251
	<i>Narrative of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of the Southern Sea</i>	
24.	Dai Jin, “Zhong Kui Travels Far”	255
25.	Pages from the <i>Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui</i>	259
26.	Huaguang meets King Yama in hell, from <i>Tale of Huaguang</i>	277
27-28.	The fifth court of hell, from the Vidor Collection	280
29.	A netherworld court and tortures in hell, from <i>Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui</i> ...	282

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Introduction

“Because I admired the immortal’s benevolence, I collated his traces (*yi* 遺) and transformed them into this book... This book is not only intended for those disciples who devote themselves entirely to seeking immortality, but it is also meant for those who wish to cultivate their minds (*xiuxin* 修心) and revere the gods (*zunshen* 尊神).”

--- Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨, preface to *The Enchanted Date* (*Zhouzao ji* 呪棗記)

1. Overview

1.1. Origin Narratives

Around the turn of the seventeenth century, the bustling book markets of southeast China saw a surge in publication of illustrated books narrating the lives of some of China’s most beloved heroes, deities, and immortals.¹ These books molded centuries of lore and reverence into the format of *xiaoshuo* narratives, bringing to life the biographies of key cultural figures. I term these books “origin narratives” since they focus on the origin story of a single main protagonist from start to finish, and often designate themselves as tales of origins, or *chushen* 出身, of a protagonist who is invariably a widely-revered figure. Their retellings of the achievements and miraculous adventures of figures like Confucius, Guanyin, Mazu, Guan Yu, Zhenwu, and the Eight Immortals, among others, were both entertaining and didactic, formulaic yet captivating. Despite their accessible language and attractive illustrations, these were anything but simple texts. The hybrid textual composition of their main narratives and the additional materials attached to them in the form of prefaces and appendices challenge long-held assumptions about literary writing and reading practices in late Ming. Origin narratives are also marked by a

¹ For a list of origin narratives and their publishing information, see the Appendix.

profound emphasis on visuality, whether in their illustrations or their cinematic narrative portrayals of the protagonists and their eventful lives. Their hagiographic bent and their inclusion of doctrinal and cultic materials reveal the liminal position of these books, conflating the realms of “literature” and “religion.” Thus, origin narratives open a rare window onto the interplay between narrative writing, print culture, and lay reverence during the Wanli period in late Ming.

The life stories of origin-narrative protagonists may diverge according to their different lores, but they are invariably woven into a fixed format, sharing a basic narrative structure and a reservoir of recurring tropes. As I shall discuss in further depth in Chapter 1, the structure of origin narratives is marked by a circular trajectory of a descent to the human world and re-ascent to heaven, a structure that echoes the trope of the “banished immortal.” Our protagonists are either divine beings themselves or reincarnations of celestial souls that were either sent down or expelled to the human realm in order to embark on a series of journeys and trials that would eventually enable them to attain enlightenment and re-ascend to heaven. Although they are devoted to life stories, the scope of origin narratives transcends the confines of human life, providing a cosmological framework as a backdrop to the adventures of the protagonists. These hagiographical narratives commence before the lives of the protagonists begin, with an overview of the universe and its various realms, or an introduction of the Three Teachings, followed by stories of their virtuous ancestors. Similarly, the narratives end after the ascension or deification of the protagonists, giving the reader a broader perspective of the impact of this life story: the history of their cult, the fates of their families and followers, the honors they received post-ascension, etc.

Origin narratives are not only tales of extraordinary individuals leading extraordinary lives, but also ruminations about the extraordinary (*xian* 仙, *sheng* 圣, *feichang* 非常) and what

distinguishes it from the ordinary (*fan* 凡, *chang* 常): predestination, self-cultivation, and philanthropic action. Although the protagonists' own efforts and talents are key to their extraordinary careers, the life of an origin narrative protagonist is a universal event that was predicted before his or her birth and will be celebrated long after he or she leaves the human realm. In life, their paths are marked by continuous striving for spiritual attainment, which hinges equally on braving various tests and the help they provide mankind as exorcists, generals, miracle workers, saviors, and sages.

Origin narratives relate to the lore and cult of their protagonists in diverse ways. Primarily, origin narratives propagate a holistic vision of the hagiography and iconography of the protagonist, drawing on centuries of written and oral lore. Through their engaging recounting of these extraordinary lives, origin narratives demonstrate the powers and effectiveness of their protagonists as heroes, deities, and immortals – and consequently, their worthiness of our reverence. Due to the immense popularity of these books among lay readers, their hagiographic portrayals had a standardizing effect on the lore of their protagonists in the following centuries.

Secondly, the doctrinal teachings that came to be associated with the protagonists and the history of their cults play a central role in origin narratives. These books weave scriptural and liturgical materials into the narrative, thus providing unprecedented access to these materials for the general lay reader. Furthermore, they promote their own interpretation of sectarian teachings and renegotiate the relationship between the protagonists' lore and the ritual traditions that came to be associated with them.

Thirdly, in their depictions of the “sacred geography” of their protagonists – the pilgrimage centers and sites associated with their lore – origin narratives function as topo-creative texts, reshaping the geo-cultural landscape of China in the popular imagination.

Lastly, when origin narratives were first published during the Wanli period, they were accompanied by a variety of non-narrative materials that tied them directly to contemporaneous practices of reverence in southeast China, particularly Jiangnan region and northern Fujian. These materials include, for instance, ritual manuals, temple inscriptions, eulogies, advertisements for new temples, praises of donors, and even messages from the protagonists themselves, revealed through spirit writing (wherein a medium transcribes the words of the deity).

Origin narratives are thus multilayered works, whose consumption accommodated several concomitant forms of reading in late Ming. Their composite nature alerts us to the importance of examining books as complete products vis-à-vis the context in which they were created and consumed. In other words, origin narratives were part of a diverse cultural continuum that should be taken into consideration when examining these books. In this respect, I follow Roger Chartier and Gérard Genette's conceptualization of the book as a material object whose format and cultural context informed its reading, or consumption, in a particular time and place. Furthermore, the hybrid composition of origin narratives also highlights the strong bond between reading and action, between books and the world beyond the printed page. As we shall see in the following chapters, origin narratives are rooted in real-world practice, and their consumption carries real-world implications. Moreover, the visual dimension of origin narratives, particularly their *imagetext* format of picture-above-text, cannot be fully understood without paying heed to the visual culture in which they were produced and consumed. Thus, my examination of origin narratives is guided by the assumption that it is the combination of the work itself, its physical format, and its broader context that shaped the horizon of expectations of the reader and determined its reception.

Accordingly, in this dissertation I combine close readings of origin narratives with historical study of late Ming publishing and the cults of the books' protagonists. To this end, I examine these works in conjunction with a wide range of materials that fall into the categories of literature, religion, and history. These materials include literary works (prose and poetry), canonical texts, inscriptions, popular religious tracts (*baojuan* and *shanshu*), daily-life encyclopedias, diaries and travelogues, geographical compendia, local gazetteers, pictorial hagiographies, and art works, among others.

1.2. Origin Narratives in the World of Late-Ming Writing and Worship

Late-Ming origin narratives were published by commercial printing houses in the Jiangnan region and further south in Fujian Province, particularly in Jianyang 建陽, one of China's largest centers of commercial publishing during late Ming. Among the prominent publishers of origin narratives was the famous Yu Xiangdou 余象斗, the most dominant figure in the Yu-family owned network of publishing houses during the Wanli period. Yu Xiangdou not only edited and probably authored some of the origin narratives examined in this dissertation, but he also used the prefaces and appendices of these works to advertise other publishing endeavors and strengthen his social and professional networks. In his preface to the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, Yu comments on the great effort he exerted in producing other origin narratives and the profits he made, while reprimanding his competitors who tapped this lucrative new market by imitating his style. It was indeed a busy – and profitable – era for publishing life stories of revered figures. In addition to the origin narratives studied in this dissertation, the Wanli period experienced something of a “hagiographic craze,” with the publication of numerous hagiographical compendia and an increasing attention to hagiographies in various types of anthologies and

encyclopedias (see Chapter 1). This hagiographic vogue sat well with another characteristic of late-Ming commercial publishing: a penchant for compiling and anthologizing that brought forth a deluge of literary collections, encyclopedias, almanacs, geographic compendia, and various sorts of reference books.² I argue that the creation and consumption of origin narratives was informed by three concomitant trends in the world of commercial publishing: the rise of the new “vernacular” *xiaoshuo* narrative style, a renewed interest in hagiographies, and a penchant for anthologizing.

The origin-narrative vogue of late Ming opens a window onto a crucial stage in the history of Chinese literature. In particular, these books provide a valuable opportunity to study the development of the *xiaoshuo* narration style and its extensive range as a form of storytelling. As I shall demonstrate in Chapters 1 and 2, the authors and editors of origin narratives weaved preexisting materials – hagiographies and doctrinal texts – into a cohesive and entertaining plotline that depicted the life of the protagonist in its entirety. Since the basic building blocks of the narrative were already in circulation, whether in canonical texts or in popular media (storytelling and dramas, for instance), examining them vis-à-vis the origin narrative into which they were adapted reveals the mechanisms behind the making of a commercially-successful late-Ming *xiaoshuo* – the literary “toolbox” of the author, if you will.

Furthermore, the common structure and recurring motifs that characterize origin narratives as a genre showcase the tastes and book-consumption habits of readers in the urban centers of southeast China around the turn of the seventeenth century. Although origin narratives

² Among the many works Yu Xiangdou published in his four-decade long career are also daily-life encyclopedias and sourcebooks, alongside narrative works. His editions of the *Shuihu zhuan* and *San guo*, which he edited and commented upon, received the most scholarly attention thus far; see Lin Yaling 林雅玲, *Yu Xiangdou xiaoshuo pingdian ji chuban wenhua yanjiu* 余象斗小说评点及出版文化研究 (Taipei: Le Jin Books, 2009).

enjoyed commercial success during late Ming and remained in circulation in the next centuries, they have been largely overlooked by modern scholarship. The main reason for this neglect is rooted in the mediocre (and oftentimes badly edited) literary quality of most of these books. As I mention in Chapters 1 and 2, these books were often produced quickly and without careful attention to detail in order to meet the demands of the book market, with profit rather than quality in mind. In other words, these books are not literary gems on par with masterworks like *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 or *Xiyouji* 西游記. And indeed, it is the misleading comparison to Ming masterworks that hinders modern scholarship of this fascinating genre. The structural and thematic similarities between *Xiyouji* and origin narratives invited such comparisons since Lu Xun grouped them together in his *Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中国小說史略; see discussion below). Structurally, *Xiyouji* also incorporates doctrinal and non-narrative religious materials into its main narrative. Thematically, it also explores the mysteries of inner alchemy and the path to enlightenment, and is likewise indebted to the Three Teachings. However, these comparisons obscure the profound differences in their reading experiences and cultural functions during late Ming. In many ways, *Xiyouji* belongs to a different realm of texts than origin narratives. As I argue in this study, the relationship between *Xiyouji* and origin narratives is that of *metatextuality*, to borrow Genette's term (see section 3 below): *Xiyouji* is a reaction to and ironic exploration of the realm of texts to which origin narratives belong.³ In the world of late-Ming commercial publishing, the widespread success and circulation of origin narratives demonstrate popular trends in reading habits, whereas works like *Xiyouji* represent the

³ Although I do not usually condone this kind of comparison, perhaps it would be productive in this context to think of the relationship between *Xiyouji* and origin narratives in similar terms to the relationship between *Don Quixote* and the knight-errant romances it ironically builds on.

exception – not the rule. In this sense, origin narratives are the backdrop, the frame of reference, that informed the masterpieces of late-Ming literature.

As a genre, origin narratives are key to understanding the development of *xiaoshuo* as a form of writing. The basic framework of origin narratives – that of a circular trajectory of descent to earth and reascent to heaven – became a mainstay in Chinese narrative writing over the course of the following centuries, furnishing the backbone of later narrative-texts, including masterpieces like *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢. The origin-narrative vogue of late Ming is thus invaluable to the study of Ming-Qing literature.

From a historical perspective, the wide circulation of origin narratives across China and their profound impact on cultic worship highlight the important role that the commercial publishing industry of southeast China played in shaping tastes and practices in other regions. These popular books thus broadcast Jiangnan and Fujian culture, strengthening the ties between the urban centers of southeast China and the periphery.

Furthermore, from the perspective of history of religion, origin narratives reveal the significant role that commercial publishers played in reshaping cultic worship and lay religious practices during late Ming. In this dissertation, I show that the producers of origin narratives transmitted a variety of specialized material – doctrinal, liturgical, and hagiographical – to a general readership that previously did not have access to this kind of information. This transmission of information took two forms: some materials were included in the books verbatim (excerpts from canonical texts and ritual instructions, for instance), whereas others were adapted and interpreted according to the understanding and agendas of the authors and publishers. Lastly, by analyzing these books as material artifacts, i.e. commodities, in the context in which they

were consumed, I argue that origin narratives functioned as worship aids – as instruments for personal and domestic reverence.

In sum, through the medium of origin narratives, authors and publishers not only provided access to religious materials that were hitherto the sole purview of the clergy and literati, but also translated doctrinal and ritual traditions– both linguistically and conceptually – for a diverse, lay audience. Moreover, the range of doctrinal and ritualistic materials that were incorporated into origin narratives reveals their dual role as vehicles for religious knowledge and as instruments of reverence for the laity. Due to the wide circulation of origin narratives and their durability in the Ming-Qing book markets, the creators of origin narratives had direct impact on lay religious worship. Above all, they set the tone for the popular reverence of cultural icons in the following centuries.

1.3. Cultural Icons

The phenomenon of origin narratives cannot be fully understood without paying heed to an underlying feature of Chinese thought and practice – that of cultural icons. Cultural icons are individuals, real or imaginary, who play multiple roles in various arenas of life. Although premodern China is not the only cultural sphere to have a stock of revered historical persons, saints, mythological figures, gods, etc., it is unique in that these characters play an array of concomitant functions in various aspects of the culture: as historical figures, as objects of cultic worship, as tokens of local heritage, and as symbols of abstract values (justice, courage, filial piety, etc.), to name a few.⁴ Each cultural icon is a “network of symbols” combined under a

⁴ My working definition of “culture” here is quite broad – all that constitutes life in a society, including material and visual aspects of life, as well as politics, art, religion, etc., of the masses and the elites alike.

single name, to borrow Barthes' notion of a protagonist (only in this case, this network represents for the audience a real, actual figure, not a fictitious character).⁵ Somewhat akin to Faure's view of the Japanese pantheon, Chinese cultural icons are also "multilevel, kaleidoscopic phenomena (some would say *noumena* and *numina*): they exist both at the level of individual belief and at that of collective representations." Gods, Faure argues, "are not *persons*: they are rather nodes in constantly changing networks, and their agency too is a network."⁶ Cultural icons are omnipresent; audiences encounter them in different contexts and use their figures in different ways. While the lore, life stories, and iconographies of cultural icons are neither stable nor uniform, audiences share some common perception of who they are and what they represent. This shared view of these icons forms a base from which a plethora of diverging cultural representations and uses emerge.

Let us look at a couple of examples. Guan Yu 關羽 (or Guandi 關帝 / Guangong 關公), originally an historical figure of the Three Kingdoms period, has been celebrated in nearly every form of writing and performance, and has been the subject of cultic worship throughout China and across East Asia.⁷ Since medieval times, one could encounter his figure in historical records, hear tales about him from storytellers, watch him portrayed on stage, read about him in various types of books ("literary" and otherwise), see his image in anything from art and daily-life utensils to murals and statues, and revere him in temples. Nowadays, his figure is also widely used in television, computer games, and internet memes, and carries an immense marketing power. Over time, Guan Yu became identified with a range of qualities of character that rendered

⁵ Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 94-95.

⁶ Bernard Faure, *Gods of Medieval Japan: vol. 1, The Fluid Pantheon* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2016), p. 14.

⁷ See Barend Ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

his figure synonymous with courage, loyalty, warfare, success, and erudition, among others.

Although his lore is multifaceted, in the popular imagination he represents a certain fixed set of personal and visual characteristics, of historical and cultural associations. He is an icon, a node of cultural significance.

Another useful example is Bao Zheng 包拯 (Baogong 包公, or Judge Bao). An historical figure of the Song Dynasty, his fame as a righteous and incorruptible judge made him a household name and a cross-cultural paragon of justice already during his life. In the course of the centuries, Baogong was likewise celebrated in writing and performance, popularly venerated as a god, and worshiped as a judge in hell. The ever-growing reservoir of stories of Baogong's court cases that have been regaling readers and viewers throughout the last millennium developed in tandem with a cultic tradition wherein Baogong has been worshipped in temples and his spirit summoned into the bodies of spirit mediums. Baogong also became an inseparable part of the local heritage of Kaifeng, Henan Province, where he served as prefect in the eleventh century. Over time, Baogong came to embody justice and incorruptibility both in this world and in the netherworld. In the realm of the living, Baogong represents the honest and incorruptible public official who cannot be swayed by bribes or intimidated by power. In the realm of the dead, Baogong personifies the rule of karmic retribution and its fair allocation of punishments and rewards in the afterlife. In contemporary East Asia, the historical heritage, narrative myth-cycle, and cultic worship of Baogong flourish alongside and in relation to a seemingly endless stream of popular-culture adaptations, from television dramas to comic books. Moreover, as a paragon of justice and a model of incorruptible civil service, Baogong stars in current debates in the PRC about China's deteriorating social values and its struggles with political corruption. Not only is he evoked in these discourses in print and on the internet, but his main temple-cum-

museum in Hefei, Anhui Province, is lined with pictures of party leaders and local politicians who flock there to exhibit their dedication to honest governing, which Baogong personifies. Thus, cultural icons like Guandi and Baogong are concomitantly used in different arenas of life, from entertainment and cultic worship to material culture and politics.

Another key issue in understanding origin narratives and more broadly the phenomenon of cultural icons in China is what I refer to in this dissertation as the *Three Ps*: person, practice, and place. The lore of a cultural icon depends on the interplay between three pillars: his or her persona, the practices associated with that persona (sectarian affiliation, doctrine, ritual, cult), and the places associated with him or her (their hometown, sacred geography, cult center, pilgrimage sites). These relationships are neither uniform nor stable, but it is their interconnections that create and reshape the cultural icons that we cherish, paint, read, and worship.

The three case studies in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine how the interaction between person, practice, and place that make up cultural icons is negotiated through origin narratives during late Ming (see detailed chapter outline below). While the *Three Ps* underlie my entire examination of origin narratives, each one of these case studies focuses on one of these aspects. In Chapter 2, I focus on *practice* by analyzing *The Iron Tree* by Deng Zhimo and its interpretation of the role of the immortal Xu Xun as a patriarch of the Jingming 淨明 Daoist sect. Chapter 3 focuses on *place*, taking the journeys of the god Zhenwu and his cult center on Mount Wudang in *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* as a case study. In Chapter 4, I explore the notion of *person* in the lore of Lü Dongbin by focusing on his supposedly autobiographical writings in *The Flying Sword* and *Tale of the Eight Immortals*.

1.4. Terminology

A couple more terminological and conceptual clarifications are in order. The centrality of cultural icons in Chinese thought and practice blurs the boundaries between notions of “sacred” and “secular” in examining cultural phenomena in premodern China. In works like origin narratives, the lines between historiography, hagiography, and fiction are often blurred, and sometimes altogether irrelevant. In this dissertation, I consider laypeople’s interaction with cultural icons more broadly as “reverence,” which takes many forms.

In dealing with these commercially-published books, we must also be aware of the limitations and obstruction of our vocabulary (verbal and conceptual) in regards to “literary” writing. In the rare occasions wherein scholars paid attention to origin narratives, they invariably categorized them as “novels.” This designation is not only anachronistic and de-contextualized, but it reframes these books as primarily works of fictitious entertainment. Instead of referring to these works as “novels,” I prefer using “narrative texts” to designate written works that are primarily vehicles for narrative, i.e. mainly composed of a story, but can also incorporate additional materials alongside the narrative. It is likewise vital at this point to distinguish between “narrative” and “narrative text:” a narrative can exist independently from the narrative-text which presents it to consumers in the form of a book, for instance in oral and pictorial forms, or in different versions in other texts. Since cultural icons are continuously ratified and reshaped by the relationship between the *Three Ps* (which usually vary by period and location), and considering the multifaceted roles they play in society, a serious examination of premodern narrative writing on cultural icons should problematize the division between “religion” and “literature,” between “sacred” and “secular.” This dissertation takes up this challenge by suspending previously-held assumptions about reading and cultural practice in late Ming China,

putting aside modern and Western categories and disciplinary boundaries, in favor of a context-based analysis that attempts to view origin narratives as products of their time and place.

1.5. Main Arguments

The origin-narrative vogue of late Ming was a unique phenomenon in the history of Chinese literature that showcases the extensive range of the *xiaoshuo* format during this period, both as a form of storytelling and as a cultural product. In the cultural landscape of late-Ming China, origin narratives occupy a liminal position between the realms of leisurely reading and devotional practices. Concomitantly entertaining and encyclopedic, origin narratives were narrative-based sourcebooks, or reference works, that presented comprehensive portraits of their main protagonists, who were invariably widely revered cultural icons. Based on my close reading of these works vis-à-vis their broader cultural context, I argue that these books served as a vehicle for the icons' lore and as practical worship aids, while also enabling leisurely viewing-reading marketed for a general, lay audience. In this context, origin narratives were not regarded as "fiction," but rather as a genuine depiction of the life story of the protagonist and the cultic tradition that surrounds his or her figure.

These multilayered works were the product of new developments in narrative writing and print culture during the last decades of the sixteenth century. In their hybrid composition and the diverse reading-viewing practices they enabled, origin narratives were indebted to the late-Ming penchant for compiling and anthologizing that characterized the commercial publishing industry of southeast China around the turn of the seventeenth century. In sum, origin narratives open a rare window onto late-Ming book consumption, revealing a unique stage in the history of *xiaoshuo* writing.

By celebrating some of China's most revered figures, origin narratives alert us to the hagiographic substrate in Chinese cultural practice, and particularly to the centrality of cultural icons in Chinese literature. By propagating encyclopedic depictions of cultural icons, origin narratives renegotiated the relationships between the three pillars that support their lore, or the *Three Ps*: their personas, the places associated with them, and the practices they came to embody. Based on my analyses of these works within their broader context, I suggest that origin narratives enabled several forms of book consumption in late Ming: as entertainment, as informative sourcebooks, and as instruments of worship whose reading experience was performative. Finally, I argue that in origin narratives reading and reverence were profoundly interconnected.

2. Scholarship Review

This dissertation builds on scholarship from the realms of Chinese literature, religious history, and print culture. The works at the center of this dissertation, which I term origin narratives, have received scarce attention from scholars thus far. Even on those rare occasions, they have seldom been considered as a group or a subgenre. To my knowledge, only three origin narratives were translated so far into Western languages; these are Gary Seaman's translation of *Journey to the North* (1987), Nadine Perront's translation of *Peregrination Vers L'est* (1993), and Philip Clart's translation of *The Story of Han Xiangzi* (2007). Seaman and Clart's translations are also accompanied by valuable introductions that remain among the only studies of these narratives that seriously consider their links to the worship of Zhenwu and Han Xiangzi.

The bibliographical studies of Sun Kaidi in the beginning of the twentieth century first brought to light the existing copies of several origin narratives, among numerous other late

imperial books, thus providing the basis for future studies.⁸ Literary scholarship of these works has been profoundly influenced by Sun Kiadi's inclusion of origin narratives in his category of *lingguai xiaoshuo* 靈怪小說, or “supernatural narratives,” and by Lu Xun's categorization of these works as *shenmo xaoshuo* 神魔小說, or “novels of gods and demons.”⁹ In his *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun groups the *San Sui pingyaozhuan*, the hundred-chapter *Xiyouji*, *Fengshen yanyi*, and *Xiyangji* together with origin narratives under the category of “novels of gods and demons.” The title of this category pertains to what he regarded as the shared underlying theme of these works – the struggle between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between the divine and the demonic. The origin narratives that Lu Xun included in this category are four late-Ming narratives that were reprinted together in the nineteenth-century in one volume titled *The Four Journeys (siyouji 四游記)*.¹⁰ In this Qing-era rendition, these works were repackaged as entertaining *youji*, and the additional materials that accompanied them in late Ming, such as ritual appendices, were dropped. It appears that Lu Xun did not have access to late-Ming editions of the four origin narratives he surveyed, but only knew them in this modified version.

As I shall argue in the following chapters, although origin narratives were not entirely unrelated to the abovementioned works that Lu Xun grouped them together with, their reading

⁸ Sun Kaidi, *Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo shumu* 中國通俗小說書目, and *Riben dongjing suojian zhongguo xiaoshuo shumu* 日本東京所見中國小說書目.

⁹ See Sun Kaidi, *Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo shumu*, pp. 188-207; Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue 中國小說史略)* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1976), pp. 187-197.

¹⁰ In their late-Ming editions, these narratives were titled *The Account of the Origin of the Dark Emperor of the North, the Venerable Master Zhenwu (beifang Zhenwu zushi xuantian shangdi chushen zhizhuan 北方真武祖師玄天上帝出身志傳)*; *The Tale of the Heavenly King Huaguang, the Emperor of Five Manifestations (Wuxian lingguan dadi Huaguang tianwang zhuan 五顯靈官大帝華光天王傳)*; *Origin Tale of the Eight Immortals and their Journey to the East (Baxian chuchu dongyou ji 八仙出處東遊記)*; and *The Complete Origin Narrative of Tripitaka of the Tang (Tang Sanzang chushen quanzhuan 唐三藏出身全傳)*. In the nineteenth-century compilation *Siyouji 四游記*, the narratives were titled respectfully *Beiyouji 北游記*, *Nanyouji 南游記*, *Dongyouji 東遊記*, and *Xiyouji 西遊記*.

experiences were different. In many ways, origin narratives are closer in function and mode of consumption to daily-life encyclopedias, hagiographic anthologies, *shanshu* 善書, and *baojuan* 寶卷 than they are to contemporaneous narrative texts. Yet the category of “novels of gods and demons” became the lens through which modern readers and scholars view late-Ming origin narratives and their relationships to contemporaneous works. This category obscures and decontextualizes the consumption of late Ming origin narratives in several ways. Not only does it allocate these works to the realm of the supernatural and fantastic, thus drawing them away from the specific historical and local heritage in which they were rooted, but it also detaches them from the world of experience and action by implying that they are no more than past-time entertainment. As I will show in the following chapters, this lens obstructs our understanding of the range of the cultural functions of these works and their reading experience in late Ming.

The study of origin narrative has also been plagued by another underlying challenge in the field of premodern Chinese narrative writing that still persists today and is related to the division between “literature” and “religion.” Existing scholarship overwhelmingly embraces disciplinary boundaries that draw these books farther away from the realities of life in late-Ming China. Invariably, scholars of literature have tended to regard “religious” elements in narrative writing as drawing from, commenting on, or reflecting certain doctrines and rituals. However, very little attention has been given to the functions these narratives fulfill beyond simply reflecting existing practices. A similar problem plagues scholarship of religion, which mostly pays attention to narrative texts when seeking to establish the date of a certain tradition or to confirm various elements of a god’s lore in popular culture, but it rarely examines critically the workings of the narrative itself, its reading experience, its uses and implications – religious and otherwise – for the audience that consumes it.

While still relying on these dichotomies, Liu Cunyan ushered in a new phase with his work on religious elements in the *Fengshen yanyi* and his detailed survey of surviving copies of late Ming narrative texts (1962, 1967). In his *Chinese Fiction in Two London Libraries*, Liu Cunyan was the first modern scholar to discuss the four origin narratives that were collected in late Qing into a volume titled *The Four Journeys*, and to raise questions concerning their late Ming editions.¹¹ This line of inquiry was taken up several decades later by Zhou Xiaowei, whose examination of the *Four Journeys* focused primarily on the relationships between these narratives and their source materials.¹²

The most notable scholarly works on origin narratives to date are credited to Li Fengmao and Bai Yiwen. Li Fengmao's research of Deng Zhimo's three narrative texts (which I call his Saints Trilogy) is not only the first to examine these works in depth, but its discussions of hagiographical writing and religious practice make valuable contributions to the study of origin narratives and their cultural context in general.¹³ This dissertation (particularly Chapter 2) is indebted to Li's study of *The Iron Tree* and the lore of Xu Xun, in which he examines this narrative vis-à-vis the long and complicated history of Xu Xun worship as a local deity and a patriarch of the Jingming Daoist sect. Li's research of the trope of the "banished immortal" in late Ming narratives is likewise valuable to this dissertation, particularly in my discussion of the structure of origin narratives in Chapter 1, as is his analysis of the ordinary and extraordinary

¹¹ See Liu Cunyan, *Chinese Popular Fiction in Two London Libraries* (Hong Kong: Lung men bookstore, 1967), pp. 138-144. Most of Liu's discussion focuses on refuting Hu Shi's claim that the *Journey to the West* included in the *Four Journeys* is an abridged version of the hundred-chapters *Xiyouji* attributed to Wu Cheng'en.

¹² Zhou Xiaowei 周晓薇, *Siyouji congkao* 四游记丛考 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexuechubanshe, 2005).

¹³ Li Fengmao 李豐楙, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian: Deng Zhimo dao jiao xiaoshuo yanjiu* 許遜與薩守堅: 鄧志謨道教小說研究 (Taipei: guojiao tushuguan chubanshe, 1997).

(*chang / feichang*) in Chinese writing.¹⁴ Yet although Li Fengmao critically examines the category of *shenmo xiaoshuo*, he still embraces it as a reference point to navigate the landscape of late Ming narratives. He moreover shifts between different categorizations of these works that still adhere to disciplinary boundaries, often referring to them as “religious” (*zongjiao xiaoshuo*) or “Daoist” (*daojiao xiaoshuo*), and emphasizing the strong bond between “literature” and “religion” without fully clarifying the nature of this relationship.

This project is also indebted to Bai Yiwen’s doctoral dissertation, the first to systematically examine origin narratives in the context of late-Ming print culture, particularly vis-à-vis the careers of the author-editor Deng Zhimo and the publishers Yu Xiangdou and Yang Erzeng.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Bai adopts the notion of *tongsu xiaoshuo* and draws a distinction between highbrow and lowbrow “literature” in her analysis of these works. Bai also builds on Li Fengmao’s notions of “religious literature,” and relies on the somewhat limiting concept of “immortals’ narratives” (*xianzhuan xiaoshuo* 仙傳小說). This emphasis on immortals and deities is inaccurate, considering that some origin narratives recount the lives of historical personas, such as Confucius and Guan Yu.

More recently, several scholars examined late-Ming narrative writing with a more nuanced approach to the blurred boundary between “religion” and “literature,” highlighting the importance of the context or circumstances in which they were written to our understanding of their connection to ritual practice. Angelika-Ursula Cedzich’s study of the *Tale of Huaguang* (*Nanyouji*) is a particularly illuminating examination of this narrative in light of late-imperial

¹⁴ Li Fengmao 李豐楙, *Shenhua yu bianyi: yi ge “chang yu feichang” de wenhua siwei* 神化与变异: 一个“常与非常”的文化思维 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).

¹⁵ Bai Yiwen 白以文, *Wanming xian chuan xiaoshuo zhi yanjiu* 晚明仙傳小說之研究 (Taipei: guoli zhengzhi daxue zhongguo wenxue yanjiusuo, 2005).

developments in the cults of the Wutong / Wuxian / Marshall Ma from which Huaguang is derived.¹⁶ Cedzich's study is valuable to this dissertation both for its successful integration of literary analysis and religious history, and for tying this book to practices of reading and reverence in late-Ming China, including domestic worship and mass production of simple liturgical texts aimed at a broad audience.

In his studies of the Chan monk Jigong and the god Nezha, Meir Shahar opened a new avenue of critical research into the relationships between “literature” and “religion.”¹⁷ In *Crazy Ji*, Shahar argues that narrative writing (which he terms “vernacular fiction”) played a pivotal role in propagating the cults of deities and shaping their lore. By examining the lore and cult of Jigong from several different perspectives – historical, literary, religious – Shahar demonstrates how diverse cultural practices contributed to the making of this icon. Moreover, his study of Jigong highlights the importance of local heritage to the development of his lore, as well as the key role that narrative writing and the performance arts played in transforming local lore into a transregional phenomenon. Shahar also breaks new ground in the close attention he pays to the important role that popular culture and non-institutional religious practices, such as spirit medium sessions, played in shaping the persona, iconography, and reverence of Jigong. Yet Shahar adopts to some extent Sun Kaidi's notion of *lingguai xiaoshuo*, placing both origin narratives and large-scale masterpieces like *Xiyouji* and *Fengshen yanyi* within the same frame of reference. As I will argue in the following chapters, the type of book consumption that

¹⁶ Cedzich, Angelika-Ursula, “The Cult of Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction: the religious roots of the *Journey to the South*,” in David Johnson ed., *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: five studies*, (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, distributed by IEAS publications, University of California, 1995), pp. 137-218.

¹⁷ Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); *Oedipal God: the Chinese Nezha and his Indian origins* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

characterized origin narratives in late Ming as hagiographical sourcebooks sets them apart from that of *Xiyouji* and other masterpieces of late Ming narrative texts.

Mark Meulenbeld's recent study of *Fengshen yanyi* represents another important step forward in the critical study of the relationship between narrative writing and religious practice in premodern China. Meulenbeld argues that *Fengshen yanyi* grew out of a specific ritual environment and that it was deeply imbedded in Daoist ritual practice.¹⁸ He furthermore highlights the link between narrative writing and performance, particularly ritual drama and theatrical forms of ritual, such as processions, drawing a straight line between what he calls "vernacular novels" and "vernacular rituals." He suggests that fiction and drama might have been understood as a part of ritual repertoire, belonging to the realm of performed religion. According to him, works like *Fengshen yanyi* were "para-liturgical," functioning as a kind of "religious chronicle." Importantly, he argues that historical narrative works like *Sanguo yanyi* functioned more as hagiographical accounts, hence their consumption does not conform exactly to our notion of "reading."¹⁹ Although Meulenbeld challenges the classification of *Fengshen yanyi* as literary fiction, he still adheres to the notion of "novel" when examining this work. Moreover, he leaves the boundaries between the novel and the religious sphere within which it was produced largely intact. He convincingly shows that *Fengshen yanyi* draws its characters and materials from Daoist lore and is informed by ritual practices, but stops short of clarifying what this means to the consumers of this book – how this fact shaped its usages and its position in the broader framework of cultural production. Nevertheless, this dissertation is indebted to Meulenbeld's

¹⁸ Mark Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, territorial networks, and the history of a Ming novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Meulenbeld, *Civilized Demons: Ming Thunder Gods from Ritual to Literature* (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2007), p. 352

study in several ways. Particularly constructive is Meulenbeld's notion that late imperial works such as *Fengshen yanyi* should be regarded as "literature of canonization." I also join Meulenbeld in rejecting the uses of the notions "fiction" and "fantasy" in studying late imperial narrative texts.

A recent study by Vincent Durand-Dastès offers another useful framework to think about hagiographical narrative texts – as representing an "alternative lay canon."²⁰ He claims that "hagiographic vernacular novels" of the Qing fulfilled two didactic roles: transmitting religious messages and showing holy characters.²¹ Although he remains somewhat constrained by the notions of "literature" and "religion" in analyzing a narrative hagiography of the Seven Perfected (*qizhen* 七真), regarding them as a means for conversion and propagating religious doctrine, his argument that these types of narratives "often claim a religious legitimacy of their own" is very productive for the study of late-Ming origin narratives.

While late-imperial hagiographical writings in general and hagiographical narratives in particular have thus far attracted little scholarly attention, this project benefits from the work of several scholars of ancient and medieval Chinese hagiographies, most notably Robert Campany, John Kieschnick, Benjamin Penny, Gil Raz, Koichi Shinohara, Julius Tsai, and Franciscus Verellen. I am particularly indebted to Campany's studies of hagiographies and miracle stories in medieval China (2002, 2009, 2012), as well as to his critique of the use of the term "fiction" and the separation between narrative and life that results from its usage.²² Julia Murray's works on

²⁰ Vincent Durand-Dastès, "A Late Qing Blossoming of the Seven Lotus: Hagiographic novels about the qizhen," in Xun Liu and Vincent Goossaert eds., *Quanzhen Daoists in Chinese society and culture 1500-2010* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 78-112.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²² Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2009), pp. 11-13.

pictorial hagiographies in China (2000, 2007, 2014) were an invaluable source for my examinations of visuality and pictorial narration in origin narratives. My work is also profoundly inspired by Bernard Faure's studies of the Japanese pantheon (2016), particularly his use of the notion of actor-network and his endeavor to build a theoretical framework to understand ever-changing, multifaceted divinities, their symbolic worlds, and the relationships between them.

This dissertation also builds on scholarly research on the history of print culture and the publishing industry in late imperial China, a relatively new field of study which made remarkable advances in the last two decades. Particularly important for my project are Lucille Chia (2000) and Cynthia Brokaw's (2007) works on the publishing industry in Fujian Province, Lin Yaling's (2009) study of the publisher Yu Xiangdou, as well as the works of Dorothy Ko (1994), Kai-wing Chow (2004, 2005), Joseph McDermott (2006), Miao Yonghe (2000), and Zhao Qian (2008). Du Xinfu's (2001) monumental listing of Ming printed works by region was an invaluable reservoir of publishing data that provided me with a wide perspective of the publishing landscape during the Ming. This dissertation is also inspired by He Yuming's (2013) study of late-Ming commercially-published books, and particularly by her interdisciplinary approach that looks at a great swath of sixteenth and seventeenth century prints, which she examines as material, social, and economic commodities, embedded in real-life practices. I also found He Yuming's attention to the reading experience of the miscellaneous works she examines to be a critical avenue of understanding book culture, which is a focal point of my study of origin narratives.

The field of religious print culture in premodern China has likewise made great strides recently. In this respect, this project builds on Marcus Bingenheimer's work on temple and local

gazetteers (2016), Lucille Chia's study of the Buddhist canon (2016) and Quanzhen publishing (2011), and Vincent Goossaert's work on revealed *shanshu* (2012).

However, while these works on premodern Chinese print culture primarily examine book culture and the publishing industry from historical and social perspectives, this dissertation aims to bridge the gap between content and context by integrating these socio-historical studies of late-Ming print culture with an in-depth analysis of the narratives themselves. In this respect, my analysis is profoundly indebted to Wei Shang's studies of print culture in late Ming vis-à-vis the textual hybridity of *Jinpingmei* (2003, 2005). His studies of *Jinpingmei* are the first to critically examine the relationships between the content of the book – the internal workings of the narrative – and the broader context of late Ming publishing, i.e. habits of reading and book culture, in which the book was produced and consumed.

3. Methodology

At the center of this dissertation is a group of approximately twenty origin narratives published in late Ming, only three of which have so far been translated into foreign languages. While my discussion in Chapters 1 and my conclusions relate to all origin narratives, in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 I analyze in depth seven origin narratives: *Origin Tale of the Eight Immortals*, *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*, *Origin Story of Huaguang*, *Complete Account of Zhong Kui of the Tang*, and three narratives by Deng Zhimo which I call his Saints Trilogy: *The Iron Tree*, *The Flying Sword*, and *The Enchanted Date*. My study of origin narratives examines them from three perspectives, i.e. taking into account their main narratives, the entire book as a complete product (including its textual layering and physical format), and the context in which these works were produced and consumed in late Ming. The basic premise guiding my examination is that these

books did not exist in a vacuum, nor did they exist independently as floating narratives; rather, they were physical commodities that were printed and read in a specific setting at a specific time, and that it was this combination of circumstances which informed their inception and reception. For this reason, I analyze these books vis-à-vis a wide range of contemporaneous works, from gazetteers and geographic compendia to canonical texts and encyclopedias.

A key tool in my discussion is Gérard Genette's notion of paratexts: the different facets of the book that present the work to the world and inform its reception. According to Genette, "the paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public."²³ Paratexts represent the *threshold* of the work, neither internal nor external to the work itself, but a zone of *transaction*, where the position of the work and the readers' approach to it are often determined.²⁴ In *Palimpsests*, Genette distinguishes between five types of paratextuality, or put simply, relationships that impact the reception of the work: architextuality, transtextuality, metatextuality, intertextuality, and hypertextuality. These do not represent categories of texts, but rather aspects of textuality. Since these notions will prove useful in the following discussion of paratexts, as well as in the other chapters of this dissertation, let us take a quick look at these concepts.

By architextuality, Genette refers to the "entire set of transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text."²⁵ He views genre as one aspect of the architext, and notes that the text itself is not supposed to know (or declare) its generic quality: "determining the generic status of the text is not the business of

²³ Gérard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext" (New Literary History, vol. 22, no. 2, 1991), p. 261; Genette, *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1-2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 1.

the text, but that of the reader, or the critic, or the public.”²⁶ This idea is particularly useful in the case of origin narratives, whose generic association shifted dramatically between the time of their publication in late Ming and their modified editions in late Qing, in accordance with a broader shift in conceptualization of narrative writing and changing reading habits between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (see section 5). And since, as Genette argues, “generic perception is known to guide and determine to a considerable degree the reader’s expectations, and thus their reception of the work,” his notion of architextuality can help us expand our gaze beyond the text itself and tease out its relationships with the reader and the world. Genette’s notion of transtextuality is also quite general, representing “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.”²⁷ His idea of metatextuality is narrower and pertains to the union of different texts – “the *critical* relationship par excellence.”

Another useful notion, one that would be particularly valuable for my discussion of Xu Yun, Zhenwu, and Lü Dongbin in the following chapters, is Genette’s idea of hypertextuality: the relationship between a given text and an earlier text “upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.”²⁸ One example of such a relationship is that of derivation, either by direct borrowing and transformation or by indirect ways, like imitation. Both types of hypertextuality are found in origin narratives.

Among these useful notions, throughout this dissertation I will most often use Genette’s idea of paratexts, which includes two components: *peritext* and *epitext*. *Peritext* designates materials inside the book, like titles, illustrations, and prefaces, whereas *epitext* stands for the

²⁶ Genette, *Palimpsests*, p. 4.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Genette, *Palimpsests*, p. 5.

world outside the book which informs the reading of the work, such as contemporaneous discourse and cultural influences.²⁹ In each chapter, I will demonstrate how the peritexts of origin narratives shed new light on late-Ming writing in general and hagiographic writing in particular. This line of inquiry will lead me to examine the relationship between origin narratives and their *epitexts*, situating these works within the larger framework of cultural production. In other words, I combine literary analysis of the narratives and their *peritexts* with a broader outlook on their *epitexts* – i.e. the broader context, the aspects of late Ming culture that informed the lives of their readers.

My examination of origin narratives from these three perspectives – the narrative, the book as a complete artifact, and its context – relies on a broad range of sources that fall under different disciplinary categories, particularly those of literature, history, and religion. Since these disciplinary distinctions did not inform late-Ming readers’ experiences of these books, in the course of my inquiry I attempt a similar suspension of disciplinary categorization. To do this, I look at the kinds of materials that formed the building blocks of origin narratives and the landscape in which they were consumed side by side. I employ here a synchronic examination of late-Ming sources, including narrative texts, gazetteers, *biji*, canonical texts, *baojuan*, travelogues, encyclopedias, and literary anthologies, among others. I supplement this line of synchronic inquiry with a diachronic analysis of the source material that producers of origin narratives used in preparing these works. As I show in the following chapters, juxtaposing origin narratives with the variety of materials that surrounded them at the time of publication can be a useful way to prevent modern-Western assumptions about discipline and genre distinctions from distorting our view of these books, and can shed valuable light on their reading experiences.

²⁹ Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” pp. 263-264.

For the same reason, I also pay special attention throughout this dissertation to the different media that informed the production and consumption of origin narratives. Specifically, I explore the visuality of these works both within the narrative and in their *peritexts*, such as illustrations. As I demonstrate, origin narratives place an unprecedented emphasis on visuality in retelling the lives of prominent cultural icons. They transform laconic biographies into cinematic descriptive narratives. Not only do they describe in detail the appearance of the icons, but they also narrate the setting and atmosphere, bringing the world of experience into the hagiographies of these icons for the first time. Furthermore, since readers of origin narratives had already encountered these icons and their visual heritage prior to reading the books, I also take into account these visual traditions – their iconographies, their visual representations in temple worship and ritual, and their appearances in art and material culture.

4. Chapter Outline

This dissertation begins and ends with thematic analyses of origin narratives as a group, or a subgenre, in late Ming. The first chapter provides a more detailed introduction to the works I refer to as origin narratives and their print culture context. The last chapter examines a recurring trope in origin narratives: journeys through the netherworld. Three case studies focusing on specific cultural icons and their origin narratives form the core of the dissertation. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I use these case studies to explore the broader cultural implications of specific origin narratives and the lore of their protagonists in premodern China. As I mentioned earlier, each of these case studies focuses on one of the *Three Ps*: practice (Chapter 2), place (Chapter 3), and person (Chapter 4).

In Chapter 1, I examine origin narratives as a late-Ming phenomenon from two perspectives: first, by analyzing the works themselves, and second, by looking at the context in which they were produced and consumed. My analysis of these works takes into account both the main narratives and their peritexts, that is, the additional materials that accompanied them when they were published in late Ming. I first examine their narratives and the numerous shared characteristics that lead me to group them together as a subgenre and regard them as hagiographic in nature. Building on my examination of the works' narration, format, style, and shared themes, I look at their approaches to lives of extraordinary individuals and their vision of the relationship between the ordinary and the divine. Going beyond the main narratives, I devote separate sections to peritexts of origin narratives: their ritual appendices and their visual presentations. Finally, I situate origin narratives within the broader landscape of late Ming publishing and book culture. I argue that the origin narrative vogue of late Ming is indebted to two concomitant trends during this period: the unprecedented development of the protagonists' cults, and trends in print culture, particularly a penchant for anthologizing and an interest in hagiographical publishing. The chapter thus acts as a detailed introduction to origin narratives as a group and their place in late-Ming popular culture, providing the basis for the three case studies that follow.

Chapter 2 takes a closer look at the role that origin narratives played in consolidating all available information about a certain cultural icon into a narrative-based sourcebook, and how origin narratives act as grounds for the renegotiation of the relationship between the lore of an icon and the doctrinal or sectarian tradition that came to be associated with him or her. As a case study, I explore the life and career of the prolific writer-editor Deng Zhimo, who authored three popular origin narratives (*The Flying Sword*, *The Iron Tree*, and *The Enchanted Date*, which I

will refer to hereafter as Deng's Saints Trilogy). I focus primarily on Deng's *The Iron Tree* and its protagonist Xu Xun, a cult figure of the Xishan area in Jiangxi who became the patriarch of the Jingming Daoist sect. By integrating local lore, canonical hagiographies, and doctrinal texts into this narrative, Deng Zhimo created a standardized origin story for Xu Xun that not only introduced his legend to a wide, transregional audience, but also set the tone for the development of the Jingming Daoist sect in the following centuries.

Travel looms large in all late-Ming origin narratives, but it plays a particularly cardinal role in the *Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North*. Not only is the narrative itself based on cycles of geographical and spiritual journeys, but it is closely related to the real-world journeys undertaken by the god and his worshipers. In Chapter 3, I examine this work in light of the expansion of the pilgrimage network around Zhenwu's cult center on Mount Wudang on the one hand, and late-Ming travel writings and geographic compendia on the other. Through this case study, I explore the role that origin narratives played in reshaping the relationship between a cultural icon and his sacred geography. Moreover, the peritexts of the *Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North* shed light on the uses of this type of publication in late Ming. This intriguing work combines the hagiography of the god Zhenwu with a ritual manual for his worship, complete with lists of offerings and a timetable of his descents to the human realm. I argue that at the time of publication, this book served as a devotional aid for the reverence of Zhenwu and as a cipher to his sacred geography.

What happens when a cultural icon joins the telling of his own life story? In Chapter 4, I analyze the supposedly autobiographical essays and poems attributed to the immortal Lü Dongbin. I show that Lü Dongbin's depictions of his own life in two origin narratives (*The Flying Sword* and *Tale of the Eight Immortals*) represent a meeting point between three genres of

writing about life: historiography, hagiography, and autobiography. I pay particular attention to Lü Dongbin's writings on walls (*tibishi*) and the growing popularity of spirit writing in his cult. Furthermore, I raise questions concerning notions of the self and forms of self-representation in late-Ming narrative writing, and demonstrate how the god's voice was used to legitimize and promote hagiographic visions of Lü Dongbin as the bard-immortal. Through this case study, I argue that the format of origin narratives and the practice of spirit writing allowed late-Ming laypeople to interact directly, and even cultivate personal friendships, with deities and immortals.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I discuss one of the most prominent recurring tropes in origin narratives: the protagonist's journey through the netherworld. This descent to hell usually appears toward the end of the narrative, as a final test of the protagonist's worthiness before his or her ascension. Didactic moralizing, eschatological visions, and heroic self-sacrifice underlie these underworld journeys. I examine three examples of such journeys through hell: those of the demon-queller Zhong Kui, the saintly Daoist immortal Sa Shoujian, and the mischievous pseudo-Buddhist deity Huaguang. A diachronic and synchronic survey of other depictions of journeys through hell allows me to situate these origin narratives within the broader literary and religious landscape of late-imperial China. I show that the trope of journeying through hell in origin narratives is part of a broader interest in the netherworld during this period, closely related to the growing popularity of morality books (*shanshu* 善書), *baojuan* literature (寶卷), and courtroom anthologies (*gong'an* 公案) in late Ming. Moreover, I argue that these portrayals had a profound impact on the lore of these protagonists, as well as on the popular conceptualization and lay practice surrounding death and the afterlife.

In my conclusion, I highlight my findings from these case studies and thematic examinations of origin narratives, and consider their broader impact. Building on my main

arguments concerning the significance of origin narratives to the study of premodern Chinese culture, I raise additional questions about the interplay between narrative writing, commercial publishing, and reverence. The appendix that follows this conclusion offers a table of late-Ming origin narratives with bibliographical information on their publishing history and textual characteristics.

Chapter 1: Late Ming Origin Narratives

1. What are “Origin Narratives”?	33
2. Narrating Lives	45
3. On Texts and Paratexts	57
4. Visuality in Origin Narratives	65
5. Origin Narratives in Late-Ming Publishing	77
6. Conclusions	85

1. What are “Origin Narratives”?

Stories depicting the extraordinary lives of cultural icons are a staple of Chinese writing and performance. Broadly speaking, hagiographies were omnipresent in premodern China: they were narrated by storytellers, played out on stage, written down by literati and commercial writers, decorated the walls of temples and everyday utensils, and were carved on tombs and stone stelae. The life stories of cultural icons not only formed the conceptual basis of their legacy in shared cultural memory, but also shaped their veneration by cementing their ties to specific places, cults, and ritual traditions. The origin narratives that are at the center of this dissertation played an important role in the history of Chinese cultural practice by producing a new form of hagiographic portrayal of cultural icons for the general public. Due to the commercial success and wide circulation of these books, this wave standardized the origin stories of key figures by incorporating a diverse body of preexisting material into the *xiaoshuo* format, often accompanied by illustrations and other types of paratexts (prefaces, appendices). This chapter examines the publishing vogue of hagiographic writing around the turn of the seventeenth century and the place of the group of books that I refer to as origin narratives within late-Ming lay reverence and book culture.

Origin narratives share several important characteristics in terms of their content, structure, layout, language, and format. The titles of origin narratives, most likely the first thing that a potential reader encounters, reveal the publishers' perception of these works as focusing primarily on the origin story of the protagonists and their quests for Daoist attainment or Buddhist enlightenment. As was customary in the Wanli period (1572-1620), titles run quite long and include several components. The key terms used in these titles are *chushen* 出身 and *chuchu* 出處, meaning "origin story," along with terms designating spiritual cultivation, such as *xiuxing* 修行 ("cultivation") and *dedao* 得道 ("attainment").¹ Titles often end with either *ji* 記, *zhuan* 傳 ("tale" / "narrative"), *zhizhuan* 誌傳 ("record"), or *quanzhuan* 全傳 ("complete narrative").

Origin narratives were relatively short, running between ten to thirty chapters (*hui* 回). The language used in origin narratives vacillates between simple classical compounds and the burgeoning "vernacular" that characterizes many late-Ming *xiaoshuo* works.² These works also follow contemporaneous works in their style of narration, whether it is in choosing an omniscient narrator or in their frequent use of expressions such as "as the story goes" (*qushuo* 卻說) or "if you do not know what happened next, continue to the next chapter" (但不知此…何如, 且看下

¹ The term *chushen* is sometimes used simply to designate someone's physical origins in the sense of "being born," in reference to one's "hometown" (出身之地), in the sense of pedigree ("noble pedigree" 贵家出身; "he is a descendant to a family of doctors" 是个医家出身), or in describing one's official post (出身做官, in the sense that "he politically-emerged as the deputy in Ji'an county" 出身為吉安縣丞), and very often in reference to one's achieving the *jinshi* status (进士出身 + date/year). See for instance, *Jingu qiguan* 今古奇觀, sections 11, 18, and 28; Feng Menglong, *Sanjiao Erpai* 三教偶拈, p. 110, and *Jingshi hengyan* 醒世恒言, p. 73. Achieving *jinshi* status as *chushen* is mentioned in Ming official documents and local gazetteers, as well as numerous *biji* and literary collections. The early-Qing novel *Xiyoubu* uses this term to designate one's advancement in the world, achieving success (出身揚名), but also in the sense of "origins" (他原是書生出身 / 你是什麼出身? / 初然在水簾洞裡妖精出身); see *Xiyoubu* 西游補, chapters 9 and 15.

² See Wei Shang, "Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issue of Vernaculars in Early Modern China," in Benjamin A. Elman ed., *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Literacies, and Vernaculars: 1000-1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 258-262.

面分解 / 又聽下回分解). Interestingly, these interchangeable uses of “reading/looking” (看) and “hearing” (聽) in these works echoes the contemporaneous exploration of the storyteller-narrator trope in late Ming.³

Yet one of the key characteristics of origin narratives, which also draws them apart from other late-imperial *xiaoshuo* works, is that they focus on a single protagonist from beginning to end.⁴ Here we are far from the overly-crowded worlds of late-Ming long *xiaoshuo* works, from the “billiard-ball” narratives of *Shuihu zhuan* or the packed *Fengshen yanyi*.⁵ Contrary to these crowded works, the trajectory of origin narratives follows a sole individual from before the cradle to beyond the grave, creating a complete outline of his or her life story, including a “prehistory” and “posthistory” that situate their extraordinary lives within a suprahuman cosmological framework. This unusual focus on the life of a single individual allowed the authors of origin narratives to significantly expand earlier, terse biographies and elaborate on the existing lore of these figures, in some cases producing the most comprehensive treatment of these icons in any media to date.⁶ As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, the transition from a brief biographical entry toward a full-length *xiaoshuo* narrative provided an opportunity to delve into the mind of the protagonist and explore his or her motivations, struggles, and psyche. Instead of a lackluster list of notable milestones in their lives, as we see

³ See discussions of this trope in Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Wilt L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

⁴ One exception to this rule is the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* (later known as *Dongyou ji*), which portrays the lives of all Eight Immortals. Nevertheless, as they are often referred to as a group, it can be argued that the *Dongyou ji* is the origin story of the Eight Immortals as a unit, and so in keeping with this rule.

⁵ See Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 309.

⁶ To name a few, the late-Ming origin narratives of Huaguang, Zhenwu, Xu Xun, Sa Shoujian, Guan Yu, Mazu, Han Xiangzi, and Linshui furen are the most extensive works on their life stories.

for instance in canonical texts and hagiographic anthologies, origin narratives offer a far more rounded portrayal of the protagonist, inside and out.

Focusing on a single protagonist did not hinder authors of origin narratives from developing highly-entertaining works. Quite the contrary: in origin narratives, we see an unprecedented dramatization of life stories that weaves cinematic portrayals of characters and scenery into action-packed plots, filled with worldly and otherworldly voyages, fierce battles, and spiritual quests. Significantly, the protagonists of origin narratives are always widely-revered cultural icons: deities, immortals, historical heroes, and mythological figures. In this sense as well, origin narratives differ from contemporaneous long *xiaoshuo* works and short *huaben*, that often take up ordinary individuals as protagonists. Therefore, for the general reader, origin narratives do not represent the first encounter with the protagonists or their origin stories; the readers' prior knowledge of these icons and their lore furnishes their reading of these narratives. In other words, for them these works represent a celebration of an icon and a retelling of a familiar story, not an entirely new set of information. Since both author and audience approach these narratives as anything but *tabula rasa*, their preexisting impressions of the protagonists and the themes discussed doubtlessly shaped their perception of these works and their reading experience.⁷ This prior knowledge was a crucial component of the works' *epitext*, to use Genette's term. There are no surprises or unexpected twists; the ending is already known in advance (i.e. ascension/deification), and it is reinforced by the rigid structure of these works, as we shall see below. Nevertheless, this prior familiarity with the protagonists and their lore did

⁷ This reading experience is impacted by what Barthes called the "off-stage" voices that guide our reading, as our reading is never detached from the world in which we live and the culture in which we are immersed; they are the "code" underlying our reading. As he notes, the parts that make up the text (code, structures) always venture out of the text – they always point towards lived experience, toward the world outside the text. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 20.

not hinder the commercial success of these works during the Wanli period, quite the contrary. Judging by their cycles of reprinting and their wide circulation, this retelling or repackaging of origin stories proved to be a hit – attesting to the extensive demand for hagiographic narratives in late Ming (see section 5).⁸

Notwithstanding the new format of the lengthy, “vernacular” *xiaoshuo* that allows us a glimpse into the minds of the protagonists, most origin narratives usually depict them not as fallible humans, but as larger-than-life cultic figures. Even as we encounter the protagonists for the first time as youths and fledgling novices, the narrative makes clear that we are dealing with a predestined hero in-the-making. In other words, although origin narratives expand the protagonists’ life stories and provide new perspectives on their person, they do not make serious attempts to humanize them or trivialize their experiences. The idolization of the protagonists underlies these narratives from start to finish.

In his work on the Qing-dynasty hagiographies of the Seven Perfected (*Qizhen* 七真), Vincent Durand-Dastès argues that the “hagiographic novel as a genre” fulfills a dual didactic function as a vehicle for religious message and as a means for attracting the lay readership by describing the immortals as feeble and ordinary humans.⁹ While I agree with his first assumption regarding the educational and religious functions of hagiographic narratives, I find that the majority of late-Ming origin narratives do not depict the protagonists as ordinary or feeble; rather, while their humanity is stressed at least in some portions of the narrative, overall the

⁸ Compare this with the commercial success of early-modern works based on the centuries-long saga of King Arthur and the knights of the round table. See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 115-122.

⁹ Vincent Durand-Dastès, “A Late Qing Blossoming of the Seven Lotus: Hagiographic novels about the qizhen,” in Xun Liu and Vincent Goossaert eds., *Quanzhen Daoists in Chinese Society and Culture, 1500-2010* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 78-89.

works go above and beyond to emphasize their larger-than-life qualities. Furthermore, origin narratives often dedicate a considerable degree of attention to the distinction between the “ordinary” (*fan* 凡) and the “extraordinary” (*xian* 仙/ *shen* 神), and some even profess to guide the reader to transcend the “ordinary” and reach out to the “extraordinary.”¹⁰

This idolization, or hagiographicalization, of these icons is further fueled by the shared structure of origin narratives, a structure which relies on a circular trajectory of descents into the human world and re-ascents to heaven. The journey begins not with the birth of the protagonist, but with a prehistory, most often in the form of a gathering in heaven or at the court of the Jade Emperor. The *Origin Story of Huaguang*, for instance, begins with a festive gathering of the gods at the court of the Jade Emperor, who presides over a contest of magical treasures. Some narratives venture even further and open with a creation myth or a cosmological overview of the universe. The origin narrative of Mazu, for instance, begins with a creation story that explains the differences between gods, humans, beasts, ghosts, and demons. *The Enchanted Date* opens with a cosmological overview of the universe, the worldly and otherworldly realms and the creatures that inhabit them, before turning our attention to the path of ascetic immortals, turning to the life story of Sa Shoujian. A more “religious” stance is taken in the opening chapter of *The Iron Tree*, which discusses the origins of the Three Teachings and the structures of the various heavens and divine grottoes, before veering into a celestial banquet scene in honor of Laozi. In the *Origin Story of Zhenwu*, the narrative starts off with a banquet organized by the Jade Emperor, who expresses a wish to reach the Buddhist Western Paradise, to which end he must reincarnate into the human world several times and cultivate himself until he attains enlightenment. This motif of “prehistory” allows the narrator to explain the reasoning behind the

¹⁰ See for instance Deng Zhimo’s prefaces to *The Flying Sword* and *The Enchanted Date*.

rise of our protagonist, the cause of his or her descent into the human world, and predicts his or her eventual deification. The cosmological opening or divine scene that opens the narrative also mirrors its ending, wherein the protagonists are once more welcomed in heaven and are granted an audience with the Buddha or the Jade Emperor.¹¹ In their “prehistories” and “posthistories,” which are new additions to the lore of these cultural icons, origin narratives expand the scope of life-stories far beyond earlier hagiographies, situating them within a broader cosmological framework.

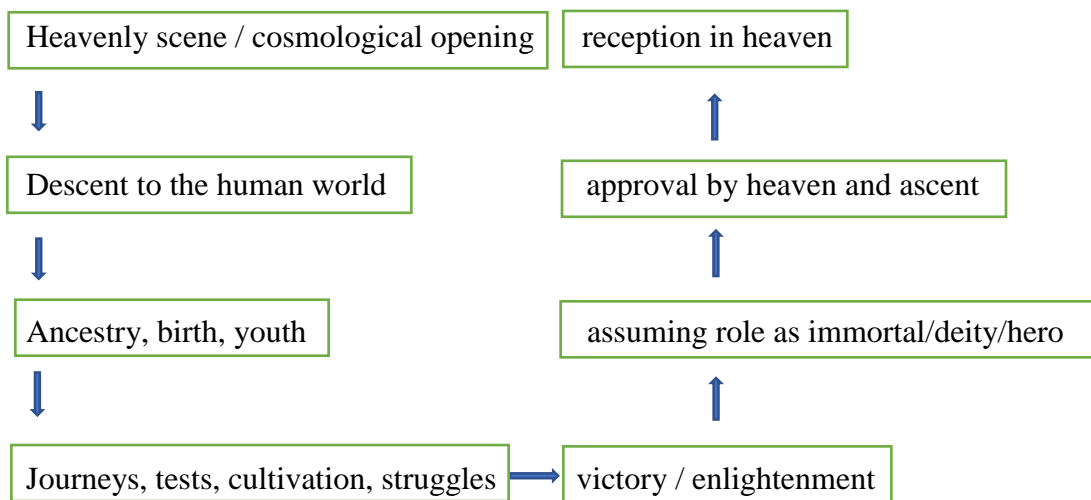
The reasons for the protagonists’ descent to the human realm vary from one narrative to the next. Some icons are sent down to the human world to combat some future threat; Xu Xun, for instance, is dispatched to save mankind from the Dragon of Poyang Lake. Yet other icons descend to achieve other goals, some are less than philanthropic; the Jade Emperor reincarnates as Zhenwu primarily in order to obtain a treasure tree that was denied of him, and only later, in the course of his self-cultivation, is he cured from this obsession. Some icons are banished to the human world to pay for transgressions they committed in heaven and earn back their celestial positions, as is the case with Lü Dongbin. The notion of the “banished immortal” (*zhexian* 謫仙) underlies many of these origin narratives, as Li Fengmao has noted.¹² This notion supports the circular trajectory of these works and it is closely related to the narratives’ focus on self-cultivation. It is somewhat unsurprising that late-Ming origin narratives chose this trope of the “banished immortal” as their main structural framework, considering that many protagonists of

¹¹ In many respects, this final scene echoes the “happy reunion” which concludes late-imperial dramas.

¹² This trope has been used since the Tang dynasty to explain the genius of extraordinary individuals, immortals, and deities. It played an important role in late-imperial literature, from *Shuihu zhuan* to *Hongloumeng*. See Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 9; Li Fengmao, “Chushen yu xiuxing: mingdai xiaoshuo shang fan xushu moshi de xingcheng jiqi zongjiao yishi” 出身與修行:明代小說謫凡敘述模式的形成及其宗教意識 (*Guowen xuezh*, vol. 7, 2003), pp. 85-86.

origin narratives were already regarded as “banished immortals” by that time. Xu Xun and Lü Dongbin, for instance, were depicted as “banished immortals” as early as the Song dynasty (see discussions in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4). In origin narratives, the “banished immortal” trope enables the trajectory of the story – it supplies the excuse for the essentially-divine protagonist to go through a tortuous path that would eventually lead him/her to assume their role as the icon we know. That is, the bildungsroman format of origin narratives relies to a great extent on this motif.

The basic trajectory of origin narratives largely follows this scheme:



This circular trajectory of descent to the human world and ascent to heaven is mirrored by some of the journeys the protagonists undergo throughout the narrative. Most notably, it is mirrored by the hero’s descent to hell, his/her journey through the netherworld, and his/her return to the realm of the living, as we shall see in Chapter 5.

Moreover, the descent to the human world is framed within a specific geographical, political, and ancestral context, which further supports the protagonist’s extraordinary prospects.

A common trope, for instance, is the righteousness of the protagonist's ancestors, who enabled the ascension of the protagonist by accumulating a great deal of moral merit. In Deng Zhimo's *Tale of the Iron Tree*, for instance, it is the good deeds of Xu Xun's father and grandfather that paved the way for his arrival in the human realm and his eventual spiritual attainment (see discussion in Chapter 2). In fact, protagonists of origin narratives usually do not make an appearance in the first few chapters of the narrative at all, even though their life trajectories are discussed by other characters (mostly deities and immortals).

Read as a group, origin narratives seem repetitive and formulaic, whether in their structure, themes, or organizing principles. The circular structure of origin narratives highlights the underlying moralistic and didactic stance that characterizes these works. It supports a popular "religious" worldview which combines the Three Teachings with local or sectarian traditions, propagating a general moral doctrine centering around karmic retribution, philanthropy, and filial piety. Didactic episodes – scenes that aim to demonstrate the protagonist's benevolence and its positive consequences – dot the narratives, and are often shared between these works, sometimes almost verbatim.¹³ The struggle for self-cultivation and the "banished immortal" trope that form the backbone of these narratives likewise reinforces the repetitive, moralizing stance of origin narratives as a subgenre.

While modern scholars regard these aspects as reflecting the narratives' poor literary value and point to these formulaic and oftentimes dull narrative traits as further excuse to ignore them, I hold that these characteristics are a vital part of this genre and are key to understanding

¹³ Consider for instance the story of the virtuous traveler: our protagonist or his/her ancestor finds a gem or a purse filled with money on the roadside, and decides to wait until the person who lost them returns to frantically search for them, and then returns to him the lost object. This story appears in *The Enchanted Date* and *The Iron Tree*, among others. It does not play any narrative function and serves no other purpose than to demonstrate to the reader the protagonist's unblemished morality, setting him/her as a paragon of virtue.

origin narratives as a cultural commodity during their time of publication. Granting that origin narratives are far from literary gems on any account, the repetitive and moralizing didacticism of origin narratives was not a side effect of poor writing, but rather an important hagiographical tool. It draws on a long tradition of hagiographical writing in premodern China, from *zhiguai* anecdotes, through biographies of eminent monks, to hagiographic anthologies.¹⁴ According to Campany, the repetition and formulaic outline of medieval biographical *zhiguai* accounts serves the overarching didactic purpose of the collection: lest one is not convinced by one incident, several dozen incidents might do the trick. Rather than exhausting the reader, the strength of a *zhiguai* collection as a vehicle for education is thus accumulative.¹⁵

Authors and publishers of late-Ming origin narratives explicitly discussed the educational and moral goals that governed the production of these works. They did not do so apologetically; on the contrary, they emphasized these aspects as the *raison d'être* of these works and saw them as fulfilling an important social duty of educating the masses. In his preface to *The Enchanted Date*, the author Deng Zhimo explains that he devoted his spare time to the writing of this work in order to help ordinary people to cultivate their minds and to provide them with a way to revere the gods. Moreover, even as publishers portrayed themselves as motivated by a moral duty toward the people, they clearly regarded this kind of didactic moralizing as an efficient marketing tool that would guarantee profit, implying that there was high demand for this line of writing. The publisher Yu Xiangdou argued in his preface to the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* that

¹⁴ This didactic repetition also characterizes hagiographical writing in medieval Europe. See Michael Goodich, *The Lives and Miracles of the Saints: studies in medieval Latin hagiography* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 305-322; Delehay Hippolyte, *The Legends of the Saints: an introduction to hagiography* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998); Cynthia Hahn, *Portrait on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth to the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 38-45.

¹⁵ Robert Campany, *Signs from an Unseen Realm: Buddhist miracle tales from early medieval China* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2012), p. 48.

although his great efforts to produce narratives such as the *Origin Story of Huaguang* generated much profit, it is not the profit itself that spurred him to continue working on similar works, but his aspiration to allow readers to transcend the “world of dust.”

Despite the plain language of origin narratives and their appeal to a wide audience, they are not simple narratives, but multilayered works; they incorporate a diverse array of materials into this seemingly rudimentary framework of “vernacular” *xiaoshuo*. Probably most easily distinguishable are excerpts imported from the Daoist canon, doctrinal tracts, and Buddhist sutras, that are sometimes quoted verbatim in the narratives or in their paratexts (see section 3 below). Literary materials, such as poems and essays relating to the protagonists or attributed to them, are imported from collections and anthologies into the narrative and paratexts of origin narratives. Numerous poems and essays attributed to Lü Dongbin that were published in late Ming in several literary anthologies were incorporated into the narrative of *The Flying Sword* and the appendix of *Tale of the Eight Immortals* (see discussion in Chapter 4). In addition, the narratives also weave a variety of liturgical materials – spells, incantations, prayers – into the plot, along with instructions for the performance of rituals relating to the protagonists’ cults or the sects they are associated with. In *The Enchanted Date*, for instance, weaves an introduction to Thunder Rites and instructions for performing them into an episode wherein Sa Shoujian assists villagers in combatting a demonic deity. Similarly, *The Iron Tree* incorporates doctrinal expositions of Jingming Daoism into the life story of Xu Xun, as *The Tale of the Eight Immortals* and *The Flying Sword* include extensive discussions of inner alchemy. Since most origin narratives place an enormous importance on the formation of the protagonists’ cults and the history of their worship, they often incorporate materials that support this history, from imperial edicts and proclamations to stone steles located at their temples.

Thus, origin narratives are hybrid texts, drawing on a range of sources in an attempt to create uniform, standardized life stories for kaleidoscopic cultural icons. The authors of these works faced the challenge of sorting through competing narratives and contrasting images of these cultural icons. Lü Dongbin, for instance, was revered as an ascetic recluse and a patriarch of the Daoist Quanzhen sect on the one hand, and as a libertine immortal who carouses with women and indulges in wine, on the other hand. He was also popularly worshiped as an inner-alchemy specialist, a miracle-worker, a calligrapher and poet, an artisan, a healer, an ink and paper merchant, a soothsayer, and even a Buddhist. While the religio-literary-cultural traditions surrounding Lü Dongbin developed in tandem and sometimes influenced each other, there remained a gap between his various life stories and the ritual practices that were associated with his lore. Temple worship of Lü and his invocation in Quanzhen rituals mostly exist independently from his life stories. The authors Deng Zhimo and Wu Yuantai not only molded a single hagiography out of this plethora of material, but also had to bridge this gap between his hagiography and the teachings or religious practices that came to be associated with him.

Furthermore, origin narratives place great emphasis on the iconography of the main protagonist and the history of his or her cult. *The Origin Story of Zhenwu* provides a telling example for this iconographical emphasis. Not only does it describe Zhenwu's in great detail several times, but it even pin-points the exact moment in which his iconography as a deity irrevocably solidified: immediately after he attains the Dao, he discovers that he could no longer rearrange his hair. His appearance, or iconography, is later described again when the narrative follows the creation of his first statues and effigies by grateful commoners – his first worshipers. The same work also depicts different stages in the founding and development of the Zhenwu cult, from the construction of his first temple to the imperial recognition and patronage of his cult

during the Yongle reign (see Chapter 3). Thus, hagiographical narratives were essential to the contextualization and legitimization of the formation of local cults in premodern China.¹⁶

This emphasis on the protagonist's iconography, cult, doctrinal association, and ritual practices draws origin narratives farther away from what we would expect to find in a "fiction novel." The information they incorporate into the narrative renders them some kind of sourcebooks for the lore of the protagonists. In this respect, they are much more than entertaining retellings of the life-stories of cultural icons; they can be read as reference works or guides to their tradition (here by "tradition" I include both their myth-cycles and their cultic reverence). Importantly, they are the first to incorporate all these materials – hagiography, iconography, doctrine and ritual practices – into the same work. Not only that, but in weaving these materials into a mass-produced *xiaoshuo* narrative, they make this information available to an unprecedentedly wide audience for the first time.

2. Narrating Lives

What makes a life story "extraordinary"? When we deal with widely-revered cultural icons, does the life story make the person, or does the persona – the iconic figure – make the story? Origin narratives celebrate iconic figures that are extremely different; Confucius and Mazu, for instance, have very little in common, as does their reverence ("religious" and otherwise). Yet the vision of an extraordinary life that origin narratives propagate follows a very formulaic trajectory, even as the specific details of the protagonists' unique lore are maintained. As we discussed in the previous section, this trajectory is framed by the circular route of descent to the human world and

¹⁶ Juliane Schober, *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Tradition of South and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 2.

re-ascent to heaven, which echoes the trope of the “banished immortal,” couched in a “prehistory” and “posthistory” of the protagonists and their cults. Bai Yiwen suggested three key components that make up hagiographical narratives, both structurally and thematically: the origin story (*chushen* 出身), self-cultivation (*xiuxing* 修行), and assistance to or salvation of mankind (*jishi* 濟世).¹⁷ Within this basic framework, origin narratives share several common elements in the depiction of iconic lives.

First, an extraordinary life begins with an unusual birth story, rife with supernatural and auspicious signs. A common motif among these stories is a problematic conception; the protagonist’s parents’ attempts to have children are unsuccessful, and the long-anticipated pregnancy is presented as nothing short of a miracle. In the *Origin Story of Zhong Kui*, the frustrated parents turn to pilgrimage and conduct a *jiao* ceremony, which indeed result in pregnancy. Zhenwu was likewise conceived after his parents, who already reached the age of forty, performed a *jiao* ceremony. *The Origin Story of Huaguang* presents a more sinister take on this common motif. Huaguang’s mother, a cannibalistic monster, took advantage of the frail state of a woman who failed to conceive and wandered alone in a secluded garden to pray for a son. Hearing her prayers, the monster devoured her and assumed her identity, soon giving birth to five sons and one daughter – Huaguang among them.

This long-anticipated and miraculous conception is usually accompanied by some divine sign, often revealed to the mother in a dream. Zhong Kui’s mother dreams that a god clad in a golden armor visits her, and a red sun enters her womb. In *The Iron Tree*, Xu Xun’s mother

¹⁷ Bai Yiwen, *Wanming xian chuan xiaoshuo zhi yanjiu*, p. 92. Bai further distinguishes between the recurring notions of “salvation of mankind,” which concerns services to humanity as a whole, such as exorcism, and “conversion/deliverance” (*duhua* 度化), wherein the protagonist urges individuals to choose the path of Daoist or Buddhist cultivation (as in the cases of Han Xiangzi converting his uncle Han Yu, or Lü Dongbin converting He Xiangyu).

dreams that a golden phoenix holding a precious pearl in its mouth flies into her chamber and she swallows the pearl, marking the conception of Xu Xun. A similar motif appears in *The Enchanted Date*, where Sa Shoujian's mother, who longed for a son a very long time, dreams that a phoenix flies into the room – an omen that an immortal is about to be born.

The mother's pregnancy is similarly portrayed as unusual. Zhong Kui's mother enters a comatose state, during which she has meets with deities who inform her that her son is an incarnation of the star Wuqu (武曲之星). The pregnancy of Huaguang's mother lasts twenty months, at the end of which she gives birth to a strange ball of flesh (see Chapter 5, section 5). The *Origin Story of Zhenwu* goes even further: his mother carries him in her womb no less than three years and sixty days. The motif of prolonged pregnancy is a mainstay in Chinese hagiographies – Laozi is said to have been born after eighty-three years of pregnancy. The roots of this motif can be traced back to Indian mythology, adopted in China by mediation of Buddhism.¹⁸

The birth itself is nearly always accompanied by a multi-sensory array of auspicious signs with a hint of the supernatural: sublime fragrances, sounds of celestial music, and various visual cues, often a glowing light or a crane or a phoenix flying into the delivery room. An unusual childhood naturally follows. Many of our protagonists exhibit extraordinary erudition and brilliance from a very young age. Some have unusual physical traits that set them apart from other children; the protagonist is either exceptionally handsome or grotesquely ugly (such as Zhong Kui and Bao Zheng / Baogong).

¹⁸ See Song Kejun 宋珂君, *Mingdai zongjiao xiaoshuo zhong de fojiao xiuxing guannian* 明代宗教小说中的佛教修行观念 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005), pp. 288-313. See also Julia K. Murray, "The Evolution of Pictorial Hagiography in Chinese Art: Common Themes and Forms," *Arts Asiatiques*, tome 55 (2000), pp. 81-83.

Here their paths diverge, each following the plotline of his or her lore. Nevertheless, even in the course of these diverging plotlines, some shared characteristics can still be found.

Primarily, the notion of travel (*you* 游) functions as the organizing principle of late-Ming origin narratives. The protagonist's life is marked by travel – voyages in the human world, otherworldly travels in the various heavens, and chthonic travels through the netherworld. The physical, geographic journeys that make up the majority of the narrative parallel the spiritual journey that the protagonist undergoes in order to attain the Dao or nirvana.

The journeys that the protagonists embark on are not only an important narrative device in this genre, but they are also closely related to the notion of “traces,” *yiji* 遺跡. Origin stories follow the spiritual trajectory of these cultural icons while outlining their “sacred geography” – the places that came to be associated with their lore or have become cult centers for their worship (see Chapter 3). In this sense, reading origin narratives allows us to follow in the footsteps of these icons, both figuratively and literally.

Throughout their worldly, otherworldly, and spiritual travels, protagonists of origin narratives undertake a series of challenges that test their abilities and strength of spirit. These trials come in different forms and shapes, though most combine physical prowess with spiritual competence and ritualistic skill. This series of tests usually culminates in a final major battle, a watershed in the narrative that marks the completion of the protagonist's mission, thus allowing her or him to transition to the last stage of their mythmaking – ascension and deification. In *The Iron Tree*, Xu Xun's heroic subjugation of the Dragon of Poyang Lake serves as a final test in which he demonstrates his skills as a Daoist practitioner and his spiritual superiority, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Zhenwu undergoes two cycles of tests in the *Origin Story of Zhenwu*. The first follows his cultivation efforts in his current and previous incarnations, which culminate in his

attainment of the Way on Mount Wudang midway across the narrative. The second series of tests consists of Zhenwu's battles with thirty-six demonic forces, whom he defeats and enlists to his army, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

Understandably, the type of challenges or trials that the protagonist must overcome accord with the kind of icon he is destined to become. That is, the type of victories that allow the protagonist to assume his or her iconic persona varies according to the focus of their lore. For instance, the key trials that Zhong Kui undergoes to become China's most famous demon-queller consist of subduing powerful malevolent spirits and overseeing their treatment in the netherworld. As a would-be goddess of mercy, it is no wonder that the challenges that Guanyin braves exemplify her compassion and her ability to save people. As for the Eight Immortals, the crossing of the Eastern Sea and their battle with the dragon king provide a platform to showcase how their traits and iconic emblems come together as a unit. Yet one common characteristic of the protagonists' tests is that they are essentially altruistic. The purpose of the challenge is to demonstrate the protagonists' effectiveness in helping the people (*min* 民), whether through eradicating demons, subduing illicit gods, saving the souls of the dead from the torments of hell, converting non-believers, or assisting others on their path to enlightenment.

These tests and challenges often reveal tensions within the protagonists' traditions. While origin narratives attempt to consolidate the various strands of multifaceted lore into standardized versions of the protagonists' origin stories, some tensions still remain. In the case of Xu Xun, for instance, *The Iron Tree* focuses on his path to become a Jingming Daoist patriarch, but his iconic battle with the Dragon of Poyang Lake highlights the roots of his early worship in local cultic practices in Jiangxi, where he was primarily celebrated as a water deity and guardian against water fiends (see Chapter 2). In the *Origin Story of Huaguang*, the main trial that Huaguang

faces – saving his monstrous mother from the tortures of hell – presents a confused and highly comical merger between his famously-mischievous persona as a trickster demon-god and his “clean” sanctioned image as a Buddhist deity. Huaguang demonstrates his filial piety in brazen defiance of divine authority, first in his journey through hell (a somewhat ironic take on Mulian’s hell journey, as we shall see in Chapter 5) and later in disguising as Sun Wukong and stealing the peaches of the Queen Mother of the West. However, the Buddha eventually forgives his transgressions in light of his filial piety.¹⁹

The final test or obstacle that the protagonist braves thus paves the way for his or her attainment, the completion of the process of becoming. Origin narratives overwhelmingly conclude with the protagonist’s deification, ascension to heaven, and assuming a divine post. Most often, the protagonist’s ascension is announced by divine messengers, who escort the protagonist to heaven, where he or she are granted an audience with the Buddha or the Jade Emperor. Celestial festivities thus conclude the narrative, somewhat reminiscent of the “happy gathering” in drama plays (*tuanyuan* 團圓). This typical ending of origin narratives also draws it closer to earlier hagiographical writing. Daoist hagiographies usually end with bestowal of celestial positions, mirroring the list of posthumous titles that usually concludes dynastic biographies. It is by entering a Daoist lineage and assuming a position in the celestial bureaucracy that a saint gains legitimization.²⁰ Similarly, the protagonists of origin narratives acquire their predestined status and complete the process of becoming the cultural icons the reader knows by ascending and taking up their divine roles at the end of the narrative.

¹⁹ This emphasis on filial piety within a Buddhist context further highlights the syncretic vision of the Three Teachings that characterizes late-Ming origin narratives.

²⁰ Suzanne Cahill, *Divine traces of the Daoist sisterhood: “Records of the assembled transcendentals of the fortified walled city”* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2006), p. 20.

Among the common themes among origin narratives is the relationship between the ordinary (*chang* 常) and the extraordinary (*feichang* 非常), between the worldly (*fan* 凡) and the transcendental (*xian* 仙).²¹ The distinction between the regular world (*fanjie* 凡界) and the transcendent realm (*xianjie* 仙界) is not uniform in these narratives; they are most often depicted as two parallel ontological realms of existence, bridged geographically (by heavenly grottos and floating clouds) and individually (by people who traverse from one realm to the other). But there are (albeit more rarely) also hints of Buddhist non-duality notions in these narratives, where the line between *fan* and *xian* is merely a conceptual distinction rooted in the human ignorance about the true nature of existence. In his preface for *The Enchanted Date*, Deng Zhimo argues that Daoist self-cultivation can allow one to cast aside the categories of *xian* and *fan*, and that transcending these conceptual boundaries is an important step toward attainment. Yet throughout his Saints Trilogy, Deng highlights the distinctions between *fan* and *xian*, both rhetorically and in the plotlines. It is this distinction that makes the protagonists' journeys worthwhile, and, in a sense, it is the *raison d'être* of these origin narrative.

In what sense are origin narratives “hagiographic”? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hagiography as the writing of the lives of saints.²² This definition holds in the case of premodern China, as long as we expand the confines of “saints” to include cultural icons that play multiple roles in the culture, including revered historical figures, local heroes, deities, and immortals. Contrary to annals or historical chronicles, hagiographies are narratives – they tell

²¹ Li Fengmao 李丰楙, *Shenhua yu bianyi: yi ge “chang yu feichang” de wenhua siwei* 神化与变异: 一个“常与非常”的文化思维 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).

²² The etymological root of hagiography is Greek, assimilated into English from Latin.

complete stories with structures and meaning.²³ Unlike the annals, which do not conclude but simply terminate, a hagiographical narrative is created through the construction or revealing of a causality, or a meaningful connection, between the events that make up the protagonist's life story, ultimately leading to a didactic or moralistic conclusion.²⁴

In both east and west, hagiographies tend to be stereotypical, not personal: their aim is to promote a creed, a lineage, or a certain vision of sainthood. Paradoxically, hagiographies are formulaic and stereotypical, but rich in specific historical detail.²⁵ It is a strange combination of a non-personal framework and a very personal set of historical circumstances. Furthermore, as Judith Boltz argues, "there is seldom any insight as to the development of the saintlike personality."²⁶ The model often eclipsed the personal stories and details of individual character, as well as downplaying controversial aspects (especially social and political involvement).²⁷

According to Campany, hagiography is both descriptive of and prescriptive for religious life: it is meant to inspire awe, veneration, and even emulation.²⁸ Although they adopt narrative form, hagiographical writings are no less didactic than doctrinal texts, only that their focus lies elsewhere. Rather than convincing by polemic arguments, they attract their readers with

²³ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" (*Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative, Autumn, 1980), p. 9.

²⁴ White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," p. 12.

²⁵ Christoph Kleine, "Portraits of Pious Women in East Asian Buddhist Hagiography: a Study of Accounts of Women Who Attained Birth in Amida's Pure Land" (*Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 85, Issue 1, 1998), p. 327.

²⁶ Boltz, *Taoist Literature*, part III, p. 157.

²⁷ Barbara Hendrischke, "The Virtue of Conformity: the religious re-writing of political biography," in Benjamin Penny ed., *Religion and Biography in China and Tibet* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002) p. 45.

²⁸ Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, pp. 100-101; Hank Glassman, "Shaka no honji: preaching, textuality, and popular hagiography" (*Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 63, no. 2, autumn 2007), p. 301.

narratives of personal experience. While biographies of regular people aim to record, hagiographies have a double role: they are used as a vehicle for education (by transmitting knowledge) as well as for worship. In this sense, creating, transmitting, and reading a hagiography is a ritualistic act. Hagiographies use “narrative thought” in locking down their subjects within a familiar temporal and spatial framework.²⁹

Hagiographical writing is not only formulaic, but also repetitive. As I mentioned earlier, in medieval China, the repetitive and formulaic outline of hagiographical *zhiguai* accounts served an overarching didactic purpose of the collection in which they were included, and in fact, the strength of a *zhiguai* collection as a vehicle for education is accumulative.³⁰ This formulaic tendency is also exhibited in the biographies of eminent monks.³¹

Geertz argues that individual life stories express abstract religious principles and thus become “models of” exemplary religious practice. At the same time, hagiographies are “models for” religious practice, since they aspire others to emulate what is described in the biography. Late-Ming origin narratives describe the self-cultivation efforts of the protagonists and the rituals they conduct on their path to enlightenment, but in broad strokes, without getting into the nitty-gritty details. They describe cultivation, but cannot be used as a manual, at least not independently. A key example of this trait is the depiction of inner alchemical practices in origin narratives: inner alchemy is often alluded to, celebrated in poetry, and discussed by characters in origin narratives (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 4). However, the narratives do not supply enough information about these practices to be useful as practical manuals of inner alchemy on their

²⁹ Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, p. 101.

³⁰ Campany, *Signs from an Unseen Realm*, p. 48.

³¹ John Kieschniek, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist ideals in medieval Chinese hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

own. In this respect, origin narratives follow a long tradition of hagiographic writing in China. As Hendrischke notes, biographies of immortals and Daoist hagiographies were introductory, an invitation to self-cultivation, but not instructional. They were meant to inspire and draw people toward Daoist practice, but not to serve as a guide on their own.³²

Nevertheless, they are not divorced from actual practice: as Raz notes, “hagiographic narratives often provide the source for the adept’s practice.”³³ Nor were hagiographies detached from the worship of the figures they portrayed; for instance, almost half of the hagiographies included in the *Lixian zhuan* refer to shrines in various locales erected in reverence of these adepts.³⁴ Hagiographies were essential to contextualization and legitimization of the formation of local cults.³⁵ Daoist hagiographies must also position themselves in the continuous debate whether immortality is predestined, that is decided by fate alone, or rather the result of correct practice and devotion. When supporting the latter, they often include prescriptions and directions for cultivation. Similarly to the list of posthumous titles that usually concludes dynastic biographies, Daoist hagiographies usually end with bestowal of celestial positions. It is by entering a Daoist lineage and assuming a position in the celestial bureaucracy that a saint gains legitimization.³⁶

Origin narratives also reflect the profound impact of Buddhist literature on hagiographical writing in premodern China. The jātaḱa stories, portraying the altruistic deeds of

³² Hendrischke, “The Virtue of Conformity,” pp. 30-48.

³³ Gil Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 44.

³⁴ Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*, p. 46.

³⁵ Schober, *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Tradition of South and Southeast Asia*, p. 2.

³⁶ Cahill, *Divine Traces of the Daoist Sisterhood*, p. 20.

the Buddha in previous incarnations, and the *avadāna* stories that depict the effects of karmic retribution, supplied a useful model for hagiographical writing. Klein generalizes that Chinese hagiographical writing is a combination of the traditional “secular” historiography and the topoi of *jātaka* and *avadāna* genre.³⁷ According to Murray, textual and pictorial biographies of cardinal Chinese figures such as Confucius and Laozi were deeply indebted to depictions of the birth and life of the Buddha, especially since the Tang dynasty.³⁸ By the time literary hagiographies or origin stories were commercially published in late Ming, the *jātaka* and *avadāna* topoi of karmic retribution and the sacred prehistory in the Buddha’s reincarnations were fully assimilated into narrative writing.

In sum, I argue that origin narratives are hagiographical works for several reasons. First, one important indicator is their focus on a single protagonist who is an iconic figure with an established lore and cult. Second, the scope of origin narratives is limited to the life of that iconic figure (including the protagonist’s prehistory and posthistory). In other words, he or she are the center of attention from start to finish. In this aspect, origin narratives differ from other late-imperial *xiaoshuo* that make occasional uses of cultural icons in their narratives, as minor characters or in specific episodes couched in a larger narrative framework. Moreover, by focusing on the entire life trajectory of a single, well-known character, origin narratives stand apart from other narrative prose writings, whether Tang *chuanqi* or other late-Ming *xiaoshuo*, that narrow their focus on a specific episode or situation, in which we only encounter a period in the protagonist’s life (and he or she are usually ordinary people). The structure of origin narratives, particularly their circular trajectory of descents and re-ascents, is also inspired by the

³⁷ Klein, “Portraits of Pious Women in East Asian Buddhist Hagiography,” p. 328.

³⁸ Murray, “The Evolution of Pictorial Hagiography in Chinese Art,” pp. 81-83.

jātaka and avadāna topoi of karmic retribution and the sacred prehistory of the Buddha's previous reincarnations.

Third, the type of information that origin narratives take pains to include, such as iconographical portrayals, history of temples and cults, and doctrinal and ritualistic materials, would be irrelevant in a non-hagiographical setting. Fourth, authors and publishers of origin narratives stressed that their works represent genuine portrayals of the protagonists, reiterating that the narratives are based on credible sources or even on first-hand information about these cultural icons. As I shall discuss more extensively in Chapter 2 regarding Deng Zhimo and his *The Iron Tree*, these truth claims are a staple of hagiographic writing, but have no place in “fiction novels.”³⁹ In addition, their repetitive and formulaic composition invokes a long tradition of hagiographical writing in China, wherein the rigid structure of life stories of saints or revered figures was not only considered the norm, but was even regarded favorably. Their didactic bent draws them close to early Daoist and Buddhist hagiographies; they concomitantly describe and prescribe religious practice. They are not detached from the worship of their protagonists, but in fact go even further than hagiographical writings in the first millennium by coupling the life story with practical ritual instructions, as we shall explore in further detail in the next section.

³⁹ Franciscus Verellen, “Encounter as Revelation: A Taoist Hagiographic Theme in Medieval China” (*Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 85, Issue 1, 1998), p. 364. According to Gil Raz, hagiographies that were included in anthologies such as the *Liexian zhuan* were not considered fiction, but as actual evidence for cultic practice and religious grouping. See Gil Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*, p. 47. According to Campany, *zhiguai* narrate uncanny events as evidential, historically-grounded occurrences, often promoting a certain idea or agenda. The level of emphasis on historicity varies from text to text; the *Shenxian zhuan*, for instance, puts greater stress on historical detail than the *Liexian zhuan*, which is more story-like. Ge Hong's *Shenxian ji*, Campany argues, was not written as fiction in the modern sense of the term, but rather as a collection of evidential accounts depicting actual things; he writes that the *Liexian zhuan* is not fabricated (非妄造也). See Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, pp. 99-104. In late Ming, Deng Zhimo similarly claims the veracity of his *The Iron Tree* (予為之作記，匪妄匪妄).

3. On Texts and Paratexts

How did readers view origin narratives when they were first published around the turn of the seventeenth century? What form of book consumption shaped their interaction with these books? In other words, what was their reading experience? To tackle these questions, let us look at the relationships between texts and paratexts in origin narratives. As I mentioned in the introduction, paratexts according to Genette is a general heading for peritexts (materials inside the book, such as titles and prefaces) and epitexts (the real-world context in which the work is read). In this section, I will focus on those layers that Genette terms peritext, and in section 5 below I shall turn my attention to the broader context, or what Genette calls epitext.

Peritexts of origin narratives come in both visual and textual forms. Nearly all origin narratives include illustrations, most often in the format of the “picture-above-text” style (*shangtu-xiawen* 上圖下文) that was extremely popular in late Ming prints, particularly in the realm of narrative writing.⁴⁰ Since the next section will examine these illustrations and other aspects of visuality in origin narratives, let us now turn our attention to textual peritexts that characterized these works.

There is no uniformity in the types of textual peritexts that accompanied origin narratives when they were published in late Ming. We find a variety of additional, non-narrative materials both before and after the main narrative. These include, for instance, prefaces by the authors and publishers, and all sorts of information pertaining to the lore of the main protagonist, such as lists of temple couplets, stone inscriptions, eulogies, ritual manuals, and excerpts from other texts – most often quoted from the Daoist canon. As we shall see in further detail in Chapter 3, the

⁴⁰ Anne McLaren uses the term “picture-strip format” in her book *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (London: E. J. Brill, 1998), p. 59.

Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North ends with a short worship manual of the god Zhenwu, which contains lists of sacrificial offerings, taboos and rules of conduct, a worship calendar (detailing Zhenwu's descents to the human world), and a eulogy copied almost verbatim from the Daoist canon. While this ritual appendix is clearly separated from the main narrative, the narrative itself also incorporates some paratextual materials; for instance, it includes a list of Zhenwu's thirty-six generals in chapter 23, toward the end of the narrative.

Another interesting example is the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, later known as the *Journey to the East (Dongyouji)*. This work concludes with a 25-page long appendix which includes prose essays, poems, temple couplets, and revealed messages produced through spirit writing. As will be further discussed in Chapter 4, many of the materials included in this appendix are attributed to Lü Dongbin, one of the key protagonists of the narrative, either directly (by adding his signature) or indirectly (by alluding that he was the source of the poems and messages). Significantly, this appendix relates directly to the local cultic reverence of the Eight Immortals as a group and Lü Dongbin in particular. The prose essays included in this appendix thank specific patrons for donating the funds to build new temple halls and for financing the carving of printing blocks. The persons to whom Lü Dongbin revealed his poems and messages are mentioned by name, allowing us to draw a network of Lü Dongbin worshippers who engaged in spirit writing, and were probably in close contact with the publisher Yu Xiangdou who produced this work.

The centrality of the reverence of protagonists of origin narratives to the book is also evident in the *Origin Narrative of Guandi*.⁴¹ The book opens with a series of stone stele

⁴¹ Its full title reads *The Account of the Holy Emperor Guan in Past Generations (Guandi lidai xian sheng zhizhuan 關帝歷代顯聖誌傳)*.

inscriptions located at Guandi temples (*miao bei ming* 廟碑銘), followed by a series of couplets (*bian lian* 扁聯) donated by devout visitors who came from all over China, from Shanxi and Sichuan to Shandong and Guangdong.⁴² These materials occupy the first twenty pages of the surviving copy (out of a total of 282 pages). Nearly all of these inscriptions and couplets date from the Ming, many of them from the Wanli period, i.e. they are contemporaneous of this origin narrative. These materials, in other words, link this narrative text to the temple worship of Guandi at the time of publishing.

The hagiography of Confucius as it is told in the *Origin Narrative of Confucius* offers more historically-leaning peritexts.⁴³ The narrative is followed by thirty-five pages of additional, non-narrative materials that make up 15% of the entire book. These materials include inscriptions (*ming* 銘), two prose descriptions of Confucius temples, ten “praises” or eulogies (*zan* 贊) for Confucius, a list of posthumous titles, a poem by the emperor Tang Xuanzong, and a detailed genealogy of Confucius descendants (*sheng dai yuanliu* 聖代源流). This description of Confucius’ lineage is arranged as a chronological list from the first generation after Confucius, and up to the sixty-second generation, in the Ming dynasty. Not only does it name important descendant of Confucius, but it also mentions key developments that relate to Confucius’ heritage. These include, for instance, proclamations and titles bestowed upon Confucius by various emperors, the hereditary titles conferred on Confucius’ descendants (*yanshenggong* 衍聖

⁴² I was able to trace one of the inscriptions to the 1589 collection *Jiaoshi dan yuan ji* 焦氏澹園集, *juan* 19, p. 133, under the section “inscriptions” (*bei* 碑).

⁴³ Its full title reads *the Complete Origin Narrative of Master Kong* (*Kong sheng zongshi chushen quanzhuan* 孔聖宗師出身全傳). For a comparison between this narrative and a hagiography of Wang Yangming, see Zhao Mingzheng 赵明政, “Mingdai de liangbu zhuanji xiaoshuo: tan ‘Kong sheng zongshi chushen quanzhuan’ he ‘Wang Yanming xiansheng chushen jingluan lu’ 明代的两部传记小说: 谈‘孔圣宗師出身全傳’和‘王陽明先生出身靖亂錄’” (*Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu zazhi*, vol. 4, 1989), pp. 43-48.

公), the maintenance of Confucius' grave and the person responsible for maintaining it in each generation, the status of important Confucius' temples, etcetera. The assumed compilers of this work, Feng Mengzhan 馮孟顛 and Feng Zhenqun 馮貞群, drew these materials from preexisting sources. Most of the information in this appendix also appears in the Jiajing period (1521-1567) gazetteer *Queli zhi* 闕里志 and some appear in the Wanli-era local gazetteer *Yanzhou fuzhi* 兗州府志.⁴⁴ Whether the compilers indeed consulted these gazetteers or whether both drew on other sources is unclear, but what is important to highlight here is that the compilers of the *Origin Narrative of Confucius* viewed this information as relevant and desirable for this volume.

So why did compilers and publishers choose to add these materials to origin narratives? Although we can only speculate how they viewed the relationship between the main narrative and the peritexts that surrounded it, there are some things we can establish with greater certainty. For one, we can safely assume that publishers regarded these non-narrative materials as pertinent to the works at hand. Moreover, considering that their main objective was financial, i.e. to make profit off selling these books, they must have regarded these additional materials as contributing to the overall marketability of these books. That is, publishers assumed that these types of materials would be of interest to a large readership and would therefore be an efficient marketing strategy. The commercial success of origin narratives (as evidenced by their wide circulation, multiple editions, and longevity) indicates that the publishers' strategy indeed worked. In this respect, the format and peritexts of origin narratives open a window onto late-Ming architextuality, including reading habits and book consumption. In section 5 of this chapter, I

⁴⁴ These appear in *Queli zhi* 闕里志, *juan* 6, 8, and 11, and *Yanzhou fuzhi* 兗州府志, pp. 621-631.

will come back to this issue and explore the place of origin narratives within the broader context of late-Ming publishing.

One type of peritext that is widespread in Chinese narrative writing but is notably missing from origin narratives is that of commentary. The absence of commentaries signals a lack of interest in literary interpretation of these texts from contemporaneous and later literati. The simplest explanation for this neglect is that it was due to the poor literary quality of these narratives (an aspect which modern scholars tend to emphasize). However, I would like to suggest that this absence of commentaries is also related to the perception of these books as hagiographies and their function as devotional aids. Since the focus of the reader and the act of consuming these books differed from works that fall more comfortably into the category of a “fiction novel,” that is, it places the correct and comprehensive depiction of a cultural icon at the center, literary commentary might have been seen as irrelevant or superfluous, not to say disrespectful from a reverence point of view.

What is the relationship between the main narrative and these peritexts? This relationship depends in large part on the specific nature of the peritexts. The ritual manual that concludes the *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* not only supports the reading of the main narrative as a veritable account of Zhenwu’s life, but also links it directly to the ritualistic worship of Zhenwu. The god’s descents to the human world to eradicate it from evil that are depicted in the narrative are granted further importance in the appendix, where a timetable pin-points these descents to specific days in the calendar. However, the materials that append the *Origin Narrative of Confucius* are historically-oriented and concern Confucius’ heritage and lineage during the millennia that separate his life and the publication of this volume. The purpose of the

inscriptions, praises, and genealogical information that conclude this book is to link the narrative of Confucius life story to the historical figure and frame the narrative as an extended biography of Confucius – not as a work of fiction.

We see a somewhat different relationship between the appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* and its main narrative: since most of the materials included in this appendix are attributed to one of the protagonists, Lü Dongbin, the appendix legitimizes the hagiographies of the Eight Immortals that make up the main narrative – the hagiography is supported by first-person accounts of the gods themselves! Moreover, the appendix draws the story and its characters closer to the reader, grounding them in real-life practices. Lü Dongbin directs his essays and poems to the reader, and his divine messages were revealed through spirit writing to ordinary people – like the reader – signaling that a personal connection with the immortal is possible, and this book is a first step in that direction. In sum, although the relationship between the main narrative and the peritexts varies according to the book and the nature of its protagonists, these peritexts seem to validate the narrative as a genuine depiction of the protagonists and their life stories, while also tying them to real-world practices, primarily those of cultural reverence and cultic worship.

This discussion will not be complete without mentioning peritexts in contemporaneous, non-hagiographical, *xiaoshuo* works of late Ming. One example of *xiaoshuo* peritexts reminiscent of those we see in origin narratives is the hundred-chapter *Xiyangji* 西洋記, which concludes with five texts: two essays (*ji* 記) about important temples and three stele inscriptions (*bei* 碑). These texts, which relate to persons and places discussed in the main narrative, also

appear in contemporaneous gazetteers.⁴⁵ Another telling example is the *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義, which ends with long lists of the protagonists who received divine investitures (*fengshen bang* 封神榜).⁴⁶ Finally, the hundred-chapter *Xiyouji* 西游記 attributed to Wu Cheng'en concludes with a list of sixty-two Buddhas and bodhisattvas. How did these non-narrative peritexts impact readers' experiences of these books? To what extent did consumers actually read these materials? Did they use them in other capacities when the need arose, consulting them like reference books?

The heyday of origin narratives concentrated around the Wanli period in late Ming. In the following centuries, late-Ming origin narratives continued to circulate and some new printings were produced, but the book markets did not see the appearance of new origin narratives. Even as origin narratives were still seen in the book markets during the Qing, their function – the way that they were viewed and consumed – seems to have shifted. An important example of this shift is the republishing of four late-Ming origin narratives within a single volume titled *The Four Journeys* (*siyouji* 四游記) in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This volume included the *Origin Story of Zhenwu* (now called *Journey to the North*, *Beiyouji* 北游記), the *Origin Narrative of Huaguang* (now called *Journey to the South*, *Nanyouji* 南游記), the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* (now called *Journey to the East*, *Dongyouji* 東遊記), and the *Origin Story of*

⁴⁵ For instance, the “Jianjing haichan si zhongxiu ji” 建靜海禪寺重修記 also appears in the *Jinling fancha zhi* 金陵梵刹志; the “Yu zhi hong ren pian jitianfeigong zhi bei” 御製弘仁普濟天妃宮之碑 also appears in the *Jinling xuan guan zhi* 金陵玄觀志.

⁴⁶ Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, p. 16, 62.

Xuanzang of the Tang (now called *Journey to the West*, *Xiyouji* 西遊記).⁴⁷ While the main narratives of these works remained largely unchanged, this volume significantly altered their peritexts. Not only did it drop the illustrations and altered their titles, but it also dropped the textual peritexts that accompanied these works when they were first published in late Ming. Most notably, their appendices were excluded from this volume, leaving only the main narratives. Moreover, their new titles frame all four works as *youji* 游記, rather than *chushen* 出身. The narratives are thus presented as tales, not hagiographies, and delivered independently from worship-related materials.

This repackaging and reframing dramatically changes the outlook and reading experience of these books, signaling a shift in book consumption. It indicates, for instance, that late-Qing publishers considered these books as something more akin to what we now call “fiction novels,” intended for leisurely reading. The additional functions that these books fulfilled in late Ming as sourcebooks on the lore of the protagonists and as devotional aids for their cultic worship seem to have been eclipsed by new forms of book consumption that saw these books as valuable for their entertaining storylines, not for their connection to the reverence of the protagonists. While the protagonists were still worshiped in late Qing and their hagiographies still revisited in ritual, art, drama, and oral traditions, the world of publishing underwent significant transformations. These transformations, as well as the repackaging of origin narratives as entertaining tales, contributed to the modern views of these works as “novels of gods and demons,” or *shenmo xiaoshuo* 神魔小說. Granting that most origin narratives indeed featured gods and demons, this

⁴⁷ See detailed analysis of this volume in Zhou Xiaowei, *Siyouji congkao* 四游记丛考 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005).

category severs the intricate connections of these works to late-Ming lay reverence, de-contextualizing them.

4. Visuality in Origin Narratives

If we strolled into a bookstore, came across a book-peddler, or were lucky enough to visit the famous book fairs of southeast China during the first decade of the seventeenth century, origin narratives would have probably struck us as a nice bargain. They are in many ways a product of their time: short and entertaining works in the new “vernacular” *xiaoshuo*, focusing on life stories of cherished icons, appended with additional texts of interest, and sprouting full-page illustrations or the then-fashionable “picture-above-text” format. While we have almost no direct information about the audience’s experience with these books when they began circulating in the book markets of Northern Fujian during the Wanli period, we can safely assume that the physical format of these works had some impact on their consumption.



Figure 1: Xu Xun fighting the dragon, from *The Iron Tree*

In prints that sported the picture-above-text format, the illustration occupies the upper third of the page, with the text occupying the rest of the page below in ten-to-thirteen columns, separated by dividing lines. Each illustration is flanked by short headings on both sides that indicate what is the scene depicted in the illustration. The captions on both sides of the image are boxed alongside them but separated, unlike inscriptions in paintings. This layout informs the reading experience of these books in several ways. Since the illustration and its heading is supposed to match the narrative in the text below, this format creates a single unit of an *imagetext*, which the audience comes into contact with all at once. The experience, then, is that of simultaneous reading-viewing. Moreover, the *imagetext* – especially with the illustrations’ headings – parses the narrative into scenes. Even before reading the text below, the reader-viewer can already guess what would be the main focus of the ten lines of text below. This division also helps the reader-viewer to keep track of the flow of the narrative, and it might even provide some guidance for less-educated readers that face difficulties following the text.



Figure 2 (left): the first page of the *Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North*
 Figure 3 (right): the first page of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*



The picture-above-text illustrations in late-Ming narratives are somewhat rudimentary, even dull; scenes of intense action are quite rare (one notable exception are hell scenes in which the tortures of hell are graphically depicted in the illustrations above the text, as will be discussed in Chapter 5). Most of the illustrations show rather mundane scenes: the protagonist walking or talking to another figure, for instance. Rarely does an illustration include more than two or three figures within the same picture, and never more than five persons. A portion of the illustrations portray landscape or inanimate objects, some more relevant than others to the text below. Interestingly, some peritexts include picture-above-text illustrations whereas others do not. The appendices of the *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu* and the *Origin Narrative of Confucius* are accompanied by illustrations from start to finish, while the appendix of the *Tale of the Eight*

Immortals and the materials that open the *Origin Narrative of Guandi* do not include any illustrations at all.

Invariably, the aesthetic quality of the picture-above-text illustrations in origin narratives was quite low; these were minimal, coarse, and somewhat schematic images, perhaps due to the technical limitations of woodblock printing.⁴⁸ The artists who drew these illustrations and the carvers who prepared the printing blocks are not mentioned in the cover page nor in the text itself. This suggests that although publishers regarded the picture-above-text format as important to the marketing of these works (as evidenced in the titles of the works, which often included *quanxiang* 全相/全像, “fully illustrated”), they did not invest many resources in these illustrations. In fact, late-Ming pictorial illustrations (*tu*) in general were most often quite simple and did not provide much distraction from the text.⁴⁹ Chia notes that “far more important than aesthetic considerations was their effectiveness in clarifying and commenting on the main text.”⁵⁰ Unlike illustrated medical works or daily-life encyclopedias, illustrations in origin narratives would have no use on their own, only in juxtaposition to the text below. A completely illiterate consumer could not have constructed the plot from merely looking at its illustrations.

The illustrations of origin narratives seem to have served a narratorial rather than aesthetic aim – accompanying the textual content, but without supplementing it with further information, or drawing too much attention away from the plot. The general direction of

⁴⁸ Lucille Chia, “Text and *Tu* in Context: Reading the Illustrated Page in Chinese Blockprinted Books” (*Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 89, 2002), p. 243.

⁴⁹ By contrast, illustrations, maps, and diagrams were the main center of attention and in a sense the *raison d'être* of encyclopedias and albums such as the *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會, which I discuss below and in Chapter 3.

⁵⁰ Chia, “Text and *Tu* in Context,” pp. 243-244. Chia further stresses that pictures and diagrams were often replicated, to the convenience of both publisher (reducing costs) and reader (encountering familiar images).

movement in these picture-above-text illustrations is nearly always from right to left, matching the direction of reading.⁵¹ Movement toward the other direction, from left to right, characterizes improper or sinister behavior, most often displayed by the protagonist's adversaries. In the same vein, positive characters and figures of authority are positioned on the righthand side, in a half-portrait facing left.⁵² Another convention that origin narratives share with contemporaneous picture-above-text prints is that the most important figure in the illustration (a deity or the emperor, for instance) appears larger than figures of lesser importance.⁵³ As St. André argues, producers and consumers of these books shared the knowledge of these conventions, and this knowledge informed the reading-viewing experience of these books.⁵⁴

By late Ming, picture-above-text illustrations existed for several centuries. Their history is rooted in religious printing – particularly in Tang-dynasty Buddhist prints.⁵⁵ An interesting example of picture-above-text illustrations in a popular Buddhist text is a collection of divination prints produced by a Hangzhou Buddhist temple *Tianzhu lingqian* 天竺靈籤, dated sometime between Southern Song and early Ming.⁵⁶ Each page is divided into three registers: the lower includes a prophecy in verse, followed by a prose explanation; an illustration occupies the middle register, and the upper box contains additional advice for the reader. During the Song

⁵¹ Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 315.

⁵² James St. André, "Picturing Judge Bao in Ming shangtu xiawen Fiction" (*Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 24, Dec., 2002), p. 49.

⁵³ St. André, p. 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 53.

⁵⁵ Chia, "Text and *Tu* in Context," p. 245. See also Berezkin, "Illustrations of the Mulian Story and the Tradition of Narrative Painting in China (Tenth-Fifteenth Centuries)" (*Religion and the Arts*, vol. 20, no. 1-2, 2016), pp. 16-17; Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, p. 167, 173.

⁵⁶ Shih-Shan Susan Huang, "Tianzhu Lingqian: Divination Prints from a Buddhist Temple in Song Hangzhou" (*Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2007), pp. 243-296.

dynasty, when non-religious printed works began to appear, the picture-above-text style was employed in a broader range of prints, from Confucian classics and encyclopedias to historical narratives (*pinghua* 平話).⁵⁷

Buddhism had a tremendous influence on visual representations of religious biographies, or “pictorial hagiographies.” According to Murray, textual and pictorial biographies of cardinal Chinese figures such as Confucius and Laozi were deeply indebted to depictions of the birth and life of the Buddha, especially since the Tang dynasty.⁵⁸ One important example is the illustrated hagiography of the Buddha *Shishi yuanliu* 釋氏源流, produced in Nanjing by the monk Baocheng 寶成 at the Dabaoen monastery 大報恩寺 in 1425.⁵⁹ This work is the most extensive pictorial hagiography of the Buddha, spanning four hundred episodes, and was the most influential hagiography of the Buddha in East Asia until the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ It not only introduces the life of the Buddha and important sutras, but is also rife with Daoist and Confucian elements, placing it squarely within the realm of the Three Teachings. It draws its material from sixty-five sources, most of which are from the Tang or later, such as *Shijia pu* 釋迦譜 and *Yinguo jing* 因果經. Baocheng based much of his work on Tang and Song hagiographies of the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Murray, “The Evolution of Pictorial Hagiography in Chinese Art,” pp. 81-83.

⁵⁹ The front page of the 1556 edition that was available to me at the Harvard-Yenching Library notes Bao Cheng as compiler at the Dabaoen monastery (大報恩寺沙門釋, 寶成 編集). See Bao Cheng 寶成, *Shishi yuanliu* 釋氏源流 (Beijing: Zhongguo shu dian, 1993). Interestingly, Bao Cheng hails from Siming, Ningbo county, Zhejiang Province, the hometown of Zhang Kai (1398-1460) who composed an illustrated hagiography of Confucius, *Shengji quantu* 聖蹟全圖. See Emmanuelle Lesbre, “Une Vie Illustrée du Buddha (Shishi yuanliu, 1425), modèle pour les peintures murales d'un monastère du XVe s. (Jueyuan si, Sichuan oriental)” (*Arts Asiatiques*, tome 57, 2002), p. 70.

⁶⁰ Editions of this text were very popular not only in China, but also in Japan and Korea. See Suey-Ling Tsai, *The Life of the Buddha: woodblock illustrated books in China and Korea* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), pp. 12-13, 243-244.

Buddha, such as Wang Bo's *Shijia rulai chengdao ji* 釋迦如來成道記 or the *Shijia rulai xingji song* 釋迦如來行蹟頌. The work also integrates materials that have no direct connection to the life of the Buddha, such as doctrinal and liturgical texts, ritual rules, and introduction to Buddhist texts and Indian Buddhist patriarchs.⁶¹ Moreover, Baocheng adds new episodes to the life of the Buddha in order to legitimize new practices and traditions that emerged in medieval China.⁶²

The *Shishi yuanliu* is a precursor of the late-Ming commercially-published origin narratives in more than one way: not only does it sport the picture-above-text illustration format, but its textual composition also resembles the hybrid nature of origin narratives, particularly in its combination of canonical and popular sources and its adoption of the Three Teachings as a framework for retelling the life of the Buddha. Much like origin narratives, it is a personalized depiction of the Buddha's life that seeks to legitimize existing practices, designed for a wide audience of primarily lay reader-viewers, serving both didactic and ritualistic functions.⁶³

⁶¹ Lesbre, "Une Vie Illustrée du Buddha," p. 84.

⁶² Ibid. This illustrated hagiography is echoed in the murals of the Jueyuan si in Sichuan, completed sometime between 1457-1489, that is, less than half a century after the *Shishi yuanliu*. The Jueyuan si murals, encompassing 205 episodes, surpass the murals of Dunhuang and Yongle gong in their extensive hagiographic depiction of the Buddha. See Lesbre, "Une Vie Illustrée du Buddha," pp. 71-88.

⁶³ Tsai, *The Life of the Buddha*, pp. 244-246.



Figure 4: a page from *Shishi yuanliu*

Significantly, consumers of origin narratives were already engulfed in visual representations of the books' protagonists and their life stories before they encountered the book itself. Visual portrayals of these cultural icons were omnipresent, whether in everyday material culture or in more elevated forms of craftsmanship and art. The lives of these cultural icons were reenacted on stage in drama plays and adorned the walls of temples. Late Ming in particular was a period of great productivity in visual depictions of icons and their life stories. In addition to printed pictorial hagiographies, like the Buddha mentioned above, this period also saw the production of lavish albums depicting the lives of deities and immortals, such as the *Zhenxian shiji* 真仙事跡 of Xu Xun (see Chapter 2) and the *Zhenwu lingying tuce* 真武靈應圖冊 of Zhenwu (see Chapter 3). Pictorial hagiographies were also included in the Daoist canon, and some exerted direct influence on the visual and narratorial depictions of the protagonists of origin narratives.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ In composing *The Iron Tree*, Deng Zhimo drew inspiration from the canonical *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan* 許太史真君圖傳 (DZ 440). Similarly, the *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu* is indebted to the canonical text *Da Ming Xuantian shangdi ruiying tulu* 大明玄天上帝瑞應圖錄 (DZ 959), among other sources.



Figure 5: A porcelain cup featuring the Eight Immortals from the Jiajing period (1522-1566), housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



Figure 6: A seventeenth-century statuette of the Eight Immortals surrounding the god of longevity, housed at the British Museum.

Naturally, different audiences were also exposed to different visual representations of the icons. Elite audiences had more opportunities to view the icons – whether in illustrated books, works of art, or on decorated daily-life artifacts, than more common audiences, whose visual interaction with the icons took place most often in the public arena – in temple art and on stage, for instance. Moreover, we must acknowledge the geographic variation in visual and material representation of the icons, not only between different regions of China but especially between the rural countryside and urban centers.

The visual heritage of the Eight Immortals provides an interesting example of the plethora of visual representations of protagonists of origin narratives. The Eight Immortals appeared on anything from ritualistic artifacts through works of art to daily-life objects. Since the Tang dynasty, their figures were painted on bronze mirrors, temple murals, on “ritualistic currency” (*yasheng qian* 厭勝錢), painted albums, ceramic vases, Daoist talismans, statues, and paintings.⁶⁵

In sum, not only were reader-viewers of origin narratives already familiar with the protagonists’ hagiographies, but they were also familiar with their visual heritage. Furthermore, they were accustomed to prevalent forms of visual depiction of cultural icons, that is, visual skills and habits – a “period eye” – that shaped the way they consumed these books.⁶⁶ How did this prior knowledge, this “period eye,” affect their reading-viewing experience? How did it impact their understanding of these cultural icons and their lore? While we can only speculate, I

⁶⁵ On bronze mirrors portraying the Eight Immortals, see Shafer (1978-1979); on temple murals, see Katz, *Images of the Immortal*; on talismans and seals depicting the Eight Immortals, see Wang Yucheng, *Daojiao fayin lingpai tan'ao* 道教法印令牌探奥 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2000), pp. 120-125, 231-239; on Eight Immortals in albums, see the Stephen Junkunc IV collection, at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

⁶⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 40-45.

suspect that the relationship between the visual representations of these cultural icons in real life and their depiction in origin narratives was reciprocal. That is, these books relied on existing traditions of visual representations, but they also influenced later representations in various ways, for instance by contributing to the standardization and propagation of their iconography.⁶⁷

Late-Ming illustrated origin narratives should also be understood as branching from pre-Ming illustrated hagiographical anthologies. Among the first woodcut illustrated books is a Yuan-dynasty edition of the *Lienü zhuan*, produced by the Yu family (which later published numerous origin narratives). Ko notes that “these illustrations of exemplary women were so artistically skilled that Ming and Qing carvers of illustrated novels and plays also imitated their style.”⁶⁸ The biographies of exemplary women were recounted as illustrated fiction in the *Lienü zhuan yanyi*, further blurring the boundaries between entertainment and Confucian didactic historiography, revealing the janus-faced world of late-Ming publishing, where moral crusades and profit-seeking worked side by side.⁶⁹

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the relationship between the visual perceptual context of the reader-viewers and their consumption of origin narratives, it is evident that both contributed to the construction of the *iconology* of the protagonists – their *hagio-*

⁶⁷ An interesting example of this reciprocal relationship are the temple murals of Zhenwu and their connection to the *Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North*, as studied by Grootaers in the mid-twentieth century. See Grootaers, “The Hagiography of the Chinese God Chen-wu: the transmission of rural traditions in Chahar” (*Folklore Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1952),” and Grootaers et al., “Rural Temples Around Hsuan-hua (South Chahar): their iconography and their history” (Beijing: the Catholic University of Peking, 1951).

⁶⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 51.

⁶⁹ For a list of sixteenth and seventeenth editions of *Lienü zhuan* and *Guifan* works, see Katherine Carlitz, “The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late-Ming Editions of *Lienü zhuan*” (*Late-Imperial China* 12, no. 2, Dec 1991), pp. 124-125.

graphic portrayal. Furthermore, the visual representations of these cultural icons within a tangible volume of a printed book that one can conveniently purchase, carry around, and read at one's leisure, mostly in a domestic setting, brings the lore and reverence of that icon into one's personal space, into the consumer's private realm. The icon's visual representations in origin narratives also differ from paintings of that icon that one might display in the house, in its narrativity: the reader-viewer follows the icon as he or she grows, develops, and acts – not merely as a static iconographic depiction. The reader-viewer's visual encounter with the icon is therefore far more personal and private, even as it builds on the reader-viewer's prior knowledge of that cultural icon, drawn from the broader cultural public arena.

The visual experience of consuming origin narratives was not limited to its *imagetext* format. As I shall demonstrate in Chapter 2 through the case study of *The Iron Tree*, origin narratives transformed laconic and dull hagiographies into cinematic, action-packed plots. While the source material that provided the backbone for these narratives is often no more than a list of major milestones in the protagonist's life, in origin narratives we not only learn of these events but *see* them as they occur. The narratives of these books, in other words, are descriptive, not merely informative. Through their descriptive portrayal of the protagonists and their lives, the reader-viewer is granted an intimate gaze into the events. For the first time in the hagiographic lore of these cultural icons, the setting and atmosphere play a role in the narrative. The reader-viewer's attention is not only focused on what is happening, but also on *how* it happens. This descriptive approach allows the reader-viewer to visualize the scene vividly.

Furthermore, iconographical portrayals and descriptions of ritual that are made possible by this new descriptive narration tie the life story of the protagonists firmly to their cultic

veneration. The appearance of these cultural icons is described in detail time and again, juxtaposed with their visual portrayals in the illustrations. In the *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*, not only is Zhenwu's appearance before and after his attainment described in detail, but the narrative even includes directions on how to create accurate statues and images of Zhenwu for temples (see discussion in Chapter 3). When it comes to ritual, the reader-viewer gets a first-row seat to "watch" Sa Shoujian performing Thunder Rites and mortuary rituals to feed the ghosts of the dead in *The Enchanted Date* (see discussion in Chapter 5). This visual shift transforms one's interaction with the lore of the protagonist. In essence, the descriptive narrative brings the protagonists and the ritual tradition associated with them to life, providing a personal immersion experience that stands apart from the public and less interactive depictions of the icons in drama plays and temple murals.

5. Origin Narratives in Late-Ming Publishing

In order to understand the reading experience of a given work at a given time, we must look beyond the boundaries of the book itself, for – as Genette notes – “every context creates a paratext.”⁷⁰ This context is constructed of many things: the historical situation, the geographic location, cultural habits and tendencies, forms of book consumption prevalent during this period and in that area, and particularly in the case of origin narratives – the reader-viewer's prior knowledge of the protagonists and their lore. In this section, I focus on the immediate context in which origin narratives were produced and consumed, that is, the book culture and publishing industry of the Jiangnan region during late Ming. In this context, the late-Ming vogue of origin

⁷⁰ Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” p. 266.

narratives is indebted to two concomitant trends: a penchant for compilation and anthologizing on the one hand, and a renaissance of hagiographical publications on the other hand.

Late-Ming saw a new wave of publication of reference books, encyclopedias, and various types of anthologies.⁷¹ In these works, the life stories of people – biographies and hagiographies – played a substantial role. Some collections, such as the 1607 *leishu* work *Sancai tuihui* 三才圖會, sought to create a comprehensive survey of the world, a thorough representation of all knowledge about the world – packaged in a convenient and accessible format for the general reader. It moves from the most general to the particular: in its geographical sections, it moves from mapping the cosmos and heavenly constellations, through earth’s continents, down to the various provinces of China. Similarly, in its sections on people (*renwu* 人物) it moves from ancient rulers, through emperors and ministers, to various people of significance. The arrangement of biographies is thematic: sages, kings, emperors, philosophers, Buddhist masters, Daoist deities, etcetera. Within each category it progresses in a chronological order. Its depiction of people is brief; it provides a short summary of the key details about a certain person, providing the general reader with basic common knowledge. Many of these biographies are accompanied by portraits. The nine-line entry on Zhenwu, for instance, focuses on his cultivation efforts on Mount Wudang and his encounters with godly manifestations (in the form of old man and woman) who convinced him to adhere to the path (see Chapter 3). The entry on Xu Xun (28 lines) summarizes the core legends associated with his figure: the miracles he performed, his service as magistrate of Jingyang, his shapeshifting chase after a harmful dragon, and his ascension with his entire household (see Chapter 2). Therefore, the aim of these entries is not to

⁷¹ Shang Wei, “The Making of Everyday World: Jin Ping Mei *cihua* and encyclopedias for daily use,” pp. 68-73; Shang Wei, “Jin Ping Mei and Late Ming Print culture,” p. 190

offer comprehensive biographies of these people, but to provide the reader with the basic information on these figures and their significance – who they were and why they matter.

Another important example is the daily-life encyclopedia *Santai wanyong zhengzong* 三台萬用正宗, published in 1599 by Yu Xiangdou, the producer of several origin narratives, among many other works.⁷² It divides its entries on people into different categories, in separate volumes. The fourth *juan*, titled “chronical of individuals” (*ren ji men* 人紀門), depicts persons of the political arena – emperors, kings, ministers, etcetera. Figures of religious importance are discussed toward the end of the encyclopedia; *juan* 39, *sengdao men* 僧道門, is dedicated to Buddhist masters and Daoist adepts.

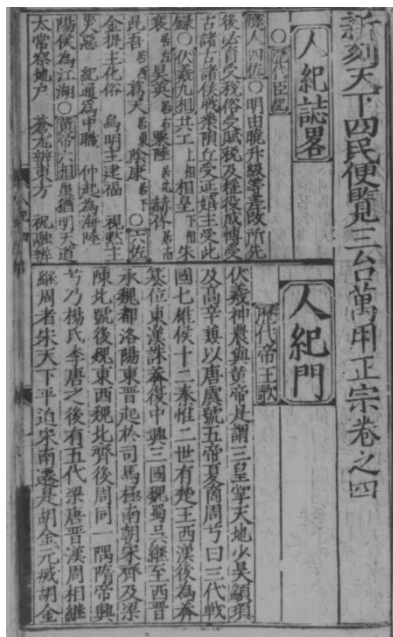


Figure 7 (left): the opening page of the *renji men* volume in the *Santai wanyong zhengzong*

Figure 8 (right): the opening page of the *sengdao men* volume in the same encyclopedia

⁷² This encyclopedia was printed by the Yu-family owned Shuangfeng tang 雙峰堂. See Shang, “The Making of Everyday World,” p. 66. Lin Yalin gives a different date of publication – 1607; see Lin Yaling, *Yu Xiangdou xiaoshuo pingdian ji chuban wenhua yanjiu* 余象斗小说评点及出版文化研究 (Taipei: Le Jin Books, 2009), p. 406. Yu Xiangdou’s long and prolific publishing career stretched from 1588 to 1637.

The Ming was somewhat of a renaissance of hagiographical writings and compilations as well. One example of an anthology of Daoist hagiographies from this period is the *Longwei mishu* 龍威秘書, edited by Ma Junliang 馬俊良 and issued by He Yunzhong 何允中 in 1592.⁷³ This compilation includes ninety-two hagiographies spreading over ten *juan*, drawing on earlier works, such as the *Taiping Guangji*, *Soushen ji*, and *Shenxian zhuan*. Another example is the compendium *Jindai mishu* 津逮秘書, published by Mao Jin 毛晋 (1599-1659), which includes eighty-four hagiographies, among other materials.⁷⁴

Much of that hagiographic exuberance in late Ming might be credited to the printing of the Zhengtong Daoist canon (正統道藏) in the fifteenth century. Not only did the canon include a considerable number of individual hagiographies (some of which were illustrated), but it also incorporated entire compendia, such as the hagiographical anthologies of Du Gunagting 杜光庭, and Zhao Daoyi's 趙道一 (fl. 1294-1307) monumental *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑒, which includes over nine hundred biographies, some long enough to occupy entire chapters.⁷⁵ The influential compilation *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 was likewise included in the Daoist canon, and later reprinted separately in 1609 by Zhang Xuan 張萱 (1558-1641).⁷⁶ Late-

⁷³ An original copy of this work is housed in the rare books collection of the C.V. Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University. A Qianlong-era (1794) reprint of this work was published in Taiwan in 1969; see Ma Junliang 馬俊良, *Longwei mishu: fu suo yin* 龍威秘書: 附索隱 (Taipei: Xin xing shu ju, 1969).

⁷⁴ This work was later incorporated into the *Siku quanshu* during the Qing. An original copy of this work was recently digitized by the University of California, Berkeley, and is available online through Hathi Trust.

⁷⁵ Du Guangting's *Luyi ji* 錄異記, *Taishang huang lu zhaiyi* 太上黃籙齋儀, and *Daode zhenjing guangshen yi* 道德真經廣聖義 were included in the Daoist canon.

⁷⁶ The *Yunji qiqian* was compiled in the eleventh century by Zhang Junfang. It included a section dedicated to biographies/hagiographies that drew from the *Yisheng baode zhuan*, *Liexian zhuan*, *Shenxian zhuan*, *Dongxian zhuan*, *Yongcheng jixian lu*, and *Daojiao lingyan ji*. See Wang Zongyu 王宗昱, "评张萱清真馆本《云笈七签》," in *Daojiao yanjiu yu zhongguo zongjiao wenhua* 道教研究与中国宗教文化 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2003). Zhang Xuan (zi Meng Qi 孟奇), headed the Qingzhen guan 清真馆 publishing firm, which published the version of

Ming publishers, editors, and authors drew extensively on these anthologies, as well as other materials from the Daoist canon, as we shall see in the following chapters.

The late Ming also saw the republishing and repackaging of several medieval hagiographical anthologies. The *Soushen ji*, for instance, appeared in several contemporaneous versions in late Ming, under slightly different titles that included terms like “complete and supplemented,” “fully illustrated,” and “newly carved,” aimed to booster sales. It was included in the Daoist canon under the title *Soushen ji* 搜神記, but it was also published commercially during the Wanli period under the headings *Soushen Daquan* 搜神大全, *Xin pian lianxiang Soushen guangji* 新編連相搜神廣記, and *Xin ke chu xiang zeng bu Soushen ji daquan* 新刻出像曾補搜神記大全.⁷⁷ The *Sanjiao yuanliu shengdi fuzu daquan* 三教源流聖帝佛祖大全 adopted the format of the *Soushen ji* in an attempt to present a similarly-comprehensive guide to the main deities and saints of the Three Teachings. Hagiographical anthologies of a more Confucian bent were also repackaged and circulated widely during this period, including for instance the *Guifan tushuo* 閩範圖說, *Ershisi xiao* 二十四孝, *Yangzheng tujie* 養正圖解, and *Dijian tushu* 帝鑑圖書.⁷⁸

Yunji Qiqian that was later included in the *Daozang Jiyao* and the *Siku Quanshu*. Not much is known about Zhang Xuan, who is not mentioned in the Ming official histories. He was born in Boluo 博羅 in Guangdong and passed the jinshi in 1582. Two of his works are included in the *Siku Quanshu*, and his *biji* is included in the *Xuxiu Siku Quanshu*.

⁷⁷ Bai Yiwen, *Wanming xian chuan xiaoshuo zhi yanjiu*, pp. 94-95; Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 316-318.

⁷⁸ Julia Murray, *Mirror of Morality*, p. 94; Joanna F. Handlin, *Action in Late Ming Thought: the reorientation of Lü K'un and other scholar-officials* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 110. The *Dijian tushu* was originally composed as a primer for the emperor, but it was also reprinted by commercial presses and circulated widely.

The hagiographical frenzy of late Ming is also demonstrated by the revival of the subgenre of biographies of eminent monks. While the tradition of biographies of eminent monks seems to have declined after Zanning in the tenth century, there was a brief and limited revival of this subgenre in the Wanli period, with the publication of the *Ming Biographies of Eminent Monks* in 1617.⁷⁹ Biographies of eminent monks served simultaneously as vehicles for theory, historical documentation, and propagation of doctrine. They were regarded by their compilers as a way to spread the Buddhist doctrine among non-believers and to serve as a model for the monastic community.⁸⁰ The structure and style of biographies of eminent monks, such as those recorded by Huijiao 慧皎 in *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, follow closely those of secular biographical writing, in line with the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, while also relying heavily on miracle story collections.⁸¹ Many of the biographies included in these hagiographical anthologies were copied from preexisting texts and tomb inscriptions.⁸²

The late Ming interest in life stories of extraordinary individuals and the period's penchant for anthologizing is also apparent in commercial publishing of narrative works other than origin narratives. A contemporaneous example of these trends is the *Baijia gong'an* 百家公案, a collection of courtroom stories (*gong'an* 公案) about the famous Judge Bao (Bao Zheng 包

⁷⁹ Koichi Shinohara, "Evolution of Chan Biographies of Eminent Monks" (*Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 85, Issue 1, 1998), p. 305.

⁸⁰ Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, pp. 5-7. Kieschnick regards these biographies as invaluable windows onto the idea of monasticism and the image of the monk.

⁸¹ See Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, p. 5; and Shinohara, "Evolution of Chan Biographies of Eminent Monks," p. 305. In some biographies of eminent monks, the distinctions between biography and miracle tale become blurred: both include historical details not necessary for the narrative but that give the text an additional aura of veracity. The resemblance and occasional overlaps between biographies and miracle tales stem from their textual format: as Shinohara shows in his work on the *Mingxiang ji*, miracle tales were written in the form of biography in order to enhance the verisimilitude of the accounts. *Ibid.*, p. 131, 145.

⁸² Shinohara, "Evolution of Chan Biographies of Eminent Monks," p. 305.

拯/ Baogong 包公).⁸³ This collection open with two peritexts that serve as an introduction of sorts to the hundred stories that follow. The first peritext is an official biography of Bao Zheng, titled “State History Biography” (*guoshi benzhuàn* 國史本傳), which is identical to that in Bao Zheng’s memorial collection.⁸⁴ The second, titled “The Origins of Rescriptor Bao” (*Bai daizhi chushen yuanliu* 包待制出身源流), is a chapter-long narrative that relates the early life of Baogong, before he became the celebrated judge. The narrative follows some of the key traits of origin narratives discussed above, with some variation. His story opens with a political introduction instead of a cosmological one, though it fulfills the same narrative function. Baogong’s birth and youth stories are extraordinary, but negative: due to his grotesque appearance at birth, his family rejects him, and he survives thanks to his sister-in-law, who adopts him and saves him from several attempts on his life. Baogong grows to be a brilliant youth, whose success is predicted by fortunetellers and a prophetic dream by the Emperor Renzong (reminiscent of the dream of Emperor Huizong that predicts the rise of the immortal Xu Xun in *The Iron Tree*). Unlike protagonists of origin narratives, Baogong’s eventual success is not accompanied by auspicious signs, but rather provides a comical take on the celestial greeting parties that we often see toward the end of origin narratives. After Baogong passes the examinations successfully and returns to his hometown, his own family does not believe him, and sends him to farm the fields. Thus, when the messengers arrive to announce Baogong’s first appointment, they ask him for directions to the Bao residence – not knowing he is the very

⁸³ The *Baijia gong’an* was edited by An Yushi 安遇時 and published by Zhu Renzhai 朱仁齋 at the Yugeng tang 與畊堂 printing house in 1594. For full publishing data and analysis of the relationship between these collections, see Yau-Woon Ma, *The Pao-Kung Tradition in Chinese Popular Literature* (PhD. dissertation, Yale University, 1971); Patrick Hanan, “Judge Bao’s Hundred Cases Reconstructed” (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1980), pp. 301-323.

⁸⁴ Ma, *The Pao-Kung Tradition in Chinese Popular Literature*, p. 179.

person they are seeking. The narrative ends with Baogong assuming his first official position, which might be regarded as the bureaucratic equivalent of a divine ascension. Thus, while this narrative of Baogong's early life is derived from earlier sources, it reflects some of the common tropes of origin narratives, including their hybrid composition and peritexts.⁸⁵

The hagiographic vogue in Wanli-era publishing seems to have declined by the 1620s. In many ways, the works of Feng Menglong mark the end of this wave and a transition toward a new approach to life stories that edges toward “fiction.” Feng Menglong borrowed several origin narratives in their entirety and reedited them as stories; some he included in the *Sanyan* 三言 collections and three of them he edited into a separate volume titled *Collected Idols of the Three Teachings* (*Sanjiao ounian* 三教偶拈).⁸⁶ As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter regarding Feng Menglong's modifications to Deng Zhimo's *The Iron Tree*, Feng greatly reduced the hybridity of the texts. He dropped peritexts (prefaces and appendices) as well as religious materials from the main narrative (such as quotations from doctrinal texts). Moreover, by excluding poems and descriptive paragraphs, Feng altered the pace and focus of origin narratives, transforming them into action-oriented stories. In this respect, Feng Menglong's adaptations of origin narratives represent a conceptual shift in the consumption of these works, a harbinger of the Qing-dynasty repackaging of these works as fiction novels.

⁸⁵ This narrative draws closely on a fifteenth-century chantefable titled *Origin Tale of Rescriptor Bao* 包待制出身传. See St. André, “Picturing Judge Bao in Ming shangtu xiawen Fiction,” p. 40; Hanan, “Judge Bao's Hundred Cases Reconstructed,” pp. 307-308; Wilt Idema, *Judge Bao and the Rule of Law: eight ballad-stories from the period 1250-1450* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2010), pp. 1-29.

⁸⁶ This volume includes three origin stories of icons representing Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism: Wang Yangming (皇明大儒王陽明先生出身靖亂錄), the Buddhist arhat Jidian (濟顛羅漢淨慈寺顯聖記), and the Daoist patriarch Xu Xun (許真君旌陽宮斬蛟傳).

6. Conclusions

The area in Northern Fujian where most of the late-Ming origin narratives were published was known as Shulin 書林, which literally translates as “forest of books.” And a rich and dense forest it was. Its roots, trunks, and branches did not exist in isolation; the books that saw light there around the turn of the seventeenth century were part of a larger cultural continuum, a landscape that informed their production and consumption. In that landscape, or “epitext” as Genette refers to the world beyond the book, two things played a particularly significant part in the rise and reception of origin narratives: print culture and lay reverence.

As I mentioned earlier, the late Ming commercial publishing industry showed a particular penchant for collating and anthologizing, fueled by a growing demand for compendia – literary, practical, geographical, and religious – among an increasingly diverse readership. In this context, the late-Ming hagiographical revival brought forth a surge in production and reprinting of hagiographical collections, as well as sections devoted to hagiographies in more general compendia. Furthermore, late-Ming reader-viewers were accustomed to a form of reading, or book consumption, that absorbed different sets of information (both textual and visual) in juxtaposition. This hybridity did not only characterize the organization of the works as a whole but is also expressed in the layout of the printing page, which was sometimes divided into two or three parallel registers, and incorporated diagrams and illustrations.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ This hybridity is seen in a variety of works, including encyclopedias, such as the abovementioned *Sancai tuhui*, daily-life encyclopedias such as the *Santai wanyong zhengzong*, in geographical compendia such as *Hainei qiguan* 海內奇觀, and in anthologies of popular literature such as the *Guose tianxiang* 國色天香. On this aspect of late-Ming print culture, see Shang Wei, “Jin Ping Mei and Late Ming Print Culture,” in Zeitlin, Judith T.; Liu, Lydia H.; Widmer, Ellen, eds. *Writing and materiality in China: essays in honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp. 187-238.

Many of these reference books, daily-life encyclopedia, geographical anthologies, and literary collections were produced by the same people who also gave us origin narratives, such as Yu Xiangdou, Deng Zhimo, and Yang Erzeng, to name just a few. The late-Ming tendency to incorporate various sets of information within a single work, and sometimes even within a single page, provided the conceptual framework for the production and consumption of origin narratives.

Origin narratives should also be understood within the context of the lay religious exuberance of late Ming. The rewriting of hagiographies, as Penny notes, indicates that the subject gained new importance during this period. Indeed, as we shall see in the following chapters, the cults and pilgrimage centers of the deities and immortals that are the protagonists of origin narratives reached unprecedented heights during this period. The Jiajing and Wanli imperial courts contributed to this exuberance by granting titles to these deities, funding printing endeavors and hagiographical works, and supporting their cult centers.⁸⁸ Other factors, such as the economic prosperity and relative social stability of the Jiajing and Wanli reigns, contributed to the proliferation of lay reverence and the development of lay movements, particularly in the urban centers of southeast China.

Origin narratives shed light on lay reverence in several ways. First, their main narratives depict both institutionalized or temple-based and domestic forms of worship. Second, their peritexts, particularly their worship manuals, open a window onto the rituals and practices that were prevalent in the region during late Ming. Moreover, both narratives and peritexts reflect the

⁸⁸ A few examples to illustrate: Guandi (Guan Yu) was granted a title in 1615; the Wanli Emperor funded the printing of the supplement to the Daoist Canon; the Ming prince Zhu Gonggui 朱拱樞 commissioned the pictorial hagiography of Xu Xun, *Zhenxian shiji* 真仙事跡 (1546); and the Ming imperial court generously supported the cult center of Zhenwu on Mount Wudang, which reached its zenith in the sixteenth century.

contemporaneous discourses among the laity on self-cultivation, inner alchemy, filial piety, and asceticism. As sourcebooks for the lore and reverence of cultural icons, origin narratives reveal something of the publishers and consumers' understanding of what is important to know – and do – concerning the protagonists. Since these widely-circulated books provided unprecedented access to religious data (such as excerpts from canonical texts and instructions for ritual) to the general lay reader, they played an important role in transmitting and propagating reverence. Lastly, through the process of sorting, repackaging, and translating much of that religious data for the consumer, authors and publishers were in a unique position to reshape lay practice.

Origin narratives were products of their time in more ways than one. Although producers of origin narratives derived most of the material for these works from preexisting sources, they took pains to link these works to current events and stress their immediate relevancy to the Wanli reader. This attempt to be up-to-date is seen in the main narratives as well as in the peritexts. In his preface to *The Iron Tree*, Deng Zhimo highlights that although the protagonist, Xu Xun, lived centuries years ago, he repeatedly returns to protect the people even in our times (當代). The *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* dedicates the last chapter to the Ming imperial patronage of his cult and its center on Mount Wudang. The genealogical list of Confucius' descendants that concludes the *Origin Narrative of Confucius* reaches all the way to late Ming. Moreover, the temple inscriptions that open the *Origin Narrative of Guandi* are dated from the Wanli period, contemporaneous of these works. The appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* announces the completion of new temple halls and praises the donors that financed their construction. Did publishers regarded these links to current affairs merely as a marketing strategy, that is, to make them seem more relevant to the consumer? Or rather, did they use these

works as a platform to share current information, communicate news that would be of interest to worshipers?

A key theme that runs through origin narratives is the relationships between the ordinary (*chang* 常) and the extraordinary (*feichang* 非常), between the worldly (*fan* 凡) and the transcendental (*xian* 仙). Invariably, the extraordinary and otherworldly form the basis of origin narratives; these are books that focus on a single protagonist who is anything but ordinary, and whose life is marked by a circular journey that begins and ends in the divine realm. Yet origin narratives repeatedly problematize the division between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the mundane and the divine, emphasizing that it is this very adherence to these boundaries that stands in the way of one's spiritual attainment.

The composition of origin narratives also highlights an underlying tension that characterizes hagiographical writing more broadly: the tension between the specific and the formulaic – between the specific lore and traits of an icon, and the ready-made formulas of hagiographic writing. Each of these books (their narratives and peritexts) focuses on an icon that is identified with a specific set of stories and traits that form the basis of his or her lore (even if this lore is multifaceted and developed into different strands over time). However, origin narratives mold this specific lore into a rather rigid framework, with a common narrative structure and a stock of recurring motifs (such as unusual birth story, as we saw earlier). Similarly to other subjects of hagiographical writing, this transition did not have a leveling effect on the lore of these icons – they maintained their specificity, their unique position, in the culture in the following centuries. Nevertheless, the medium of origin narratives did have a lasting impact on their life stories; later portrayals adopted some of the genre's formulaic elements and tropes that became permanent components of their lore.

Importantly, reader-viewers were already familiar to some degree with the life story of these widely-celebrated protagonists, their lore, ritual tradition, and iconography. Furthermore, if they had previously encountered some of these works, or hagiographic writings in general, they already had an inkling about the narrative structure and tropes that lie ahead, even before delving into the first chapter. There were no real surprises here; the end was already known to the reader before plunging into the narrative. Novelty then was not their main attraction. The reading experience of origin narratives was probably not one of anticipation and discovery, but rather that of reiteration and reaffirmation of (at least partially) familiar lore. If reader-viewers were familiar with the lore of the protagonist on the one hand and the formulaic scheme of hagiographical narratives on the other, what was the motivation for consuming them?

Although we cross here into the realm of speculation, judging by the schematic and didactic nature of these works and their place within the larger cultural context, I hypothesize that they offered at least two forms of reading, or book consumption, that draw origin narratives away from our modern view of reading literature:

1. Informative: origin narratives provide an entertaining yet comprehensive portrait of the main protagonists, including their life stories, iconographies, doctrinal and ritual associations, history of their cults, and even instructions for their worship. In this respect, one would read-view an origin narrative as a reference book, or a sourcebook, of that protagonist's tradition.
2. Performative: rereading the protagonists' life stories within a known hagiographical framework might have been motivated by a desire to earn merit, cultivate oneself, or use the works in visualization practices. Moreover, in their didactic discussions and portrayals of karmic retribution, they also fulfill educational purposes. In these cases,

the act of consuming origin narratives would have been performative – it would have a transformative impact on the reader and the world.

Finally, in order to shed light on the reading experience of origin narratives it is important to consider their self-presentation as genuine accounts, that is, as truthful retelling of the protagonists' life stories. In Deng Zhimo's prefaces to his Saints Trilogy, he reiterates that the narratives that he composed are based on fact and are not fiction (匪佞). He stresses that his work is the product of meticulous research, of collating – not inventing. Granted, we cannot take such remarks at face value, since they can be read as following the established literary convention of presenting one's work as building on previous writing. However, Deng's assertions that every detail he included can be verified and that reading his narratives would be equivalent to following the "traces of the immortals," particularly within their print-culture context, draw these narratives farther from fiction and toward the realm of historiography and hagiography. These remarks echo statements of veracity we see in medieval hagiographical writing and miracle tales.⁸⁹ Ge Hong's *Shenxian zhuan*, Campany argues, was not written as fiction in the modern sense of the term, but rather as a collection of evidential accounts depicting actual things. Ge Hong wrote explicitly about the *Liexian zhuan* that it is not fabricated (非妄造也).⁹⁰ Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Trilogy was Deng Zhimo's only *xiaoshuo* endeavor and that most of the works he authored and edited were reference books. As Plaks notes, oftentimes the same people composed different types of texts, and the only major difference was

⁸⁹ Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*, p. 47; Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, pp. 99-104.

⁹⁰ Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, p. 104.

their usage – their level of authoritativeness and truth-claims.⁹¹ In this context, if we consider Deng’s truth-claims seriously, they would reveal that origin narratives were not only produced to entertain the consumer and make profit for the publisher, but they were also conceived as useful vehicles for lore and doctrine – functioning as hagiographical records and outlets of reverence.

⁹¹ Andrew H. Plaks, “Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative,” in Plaks ed., *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 309-350.

Chapter 2:

The Filial Immortal Xu Xun and Late-Ming Print Culture

1. Introduction	93
2. Deng Zhimo and the World of Late Ming Publishing	95
3. Narrating an Immortal's Life: <i>The Iron Tree</i>	
3.1. From Episodic to Cohesive Narrative	103
3.2. Time and Space: <i>The Iron Tree's</i> Cosmological Framework	105
3.3. Xu Xun's Career: Moral Causation and Divine Guidance	107
3.4. Tests and Trials: Chasing the Dragon	112
3.5. Chronicles of Place	122
3.6. Practice: Charms, Spells, and Curses – Oh My!	126
4. The Xu Xun Cult(s): from Local Lore to Daoist Patriarch	133
4.1. Traces of the Immortal: Sources on the Xu Xun lore and cult	144
4.2. Facing the Immortal: Visual Sources	153
5. Conclusions	160

From a distance of a thousand li, he came to southern Min,
In search of the dragon, he rode on fog and clouds.
Wherever he went, he left his reputation and his extraordinary traces,
Now as ever, through the ages people have revered the True Lord.

迢迢千里到南閩，
尋覓蛟精駕霧雲。
到處留名留異跡，
今人萬古仰真君。

---Deng Zhimo, *Tale of the Iron Tree*, chapter 12.¹

¹ Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨, *Tale of the Iron Tree of Jin-era Xu of Jingyang Attaining the Dao and Capturing the Dragon*, 晉代許旌陽得道擒蛟鐵樹記 (Jiayang, Fujian: Cuiqing tang, 1603). The 1603 edition was available to me through the Erudition Database (*Ai ru sheng* 愛如生), whereas the work's second edition from 1604 was available to me in microform at the Harvard-Yenching Library (the original copy is housed at the National Library in Beijing). Wang Xiaoyang claimed that he examined an earlier edition printed in Jiangxi; according to him, its cover reads Shulin Ganzhou 書林贛州 (in Jiangxi), Benli tang printing house (本立堂刊). However, he did not mention where this extant edition is housed; at the moment of writing, I have not been able to locate it. See Wang Xiaoyang 汪小洋, "Deng Zhimo 'Tieshuji' de ling yi banben yu laiyan" 鄧志謨 鐵樹記的另一版本與來源 (*Mingqing xiaoshuo yanjiu*, no. 4, 2000), pp. 118-119.

1. Introduction

As I have shown in the previous chapter, in the early years of the seventeenth century hagiographic narratives were in vogue in the publishing capitals of Southeast China. While regaling in the extraordinary lives and miraculous careers of immortals and deities, origin narratives aimed to consolidate the disparate aspects of their lore into unified, chronological, and causal narratives. Through the proliferation of commercial publishing and transregional book trade, origin narratives raised local legends to the national stage and consolidated disparate strains of the multifaceted reverence of these cultural icons. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the producers of origin narratives was weaving information on the doctrinal teachings and the geographic locations associated with the protagonists into their life stories.

The prolific writer-editor Deng Zhimo provides a textbook example of this process. In the three origin narratives that he authored (which I refer to as Deng's Saints Trilogy hereafter), Deng Zhimo drew on a plethora of canonical, historical, and popular sources to create comprehensive portraits of Xu Xun, Sa Shoujian, and Lü Dongbin that consolidate their hagiographies with the places and the ritual or doctrinal traditions that came to be associated with their lore. In other words, through these narratives, Deng promoted his own interpretation of the relationships between the personas, places, and practices that make up the lore of these cultural icons. This merging of information from various sources into a single narrative should be considered vis-à-vis Deng's prolific career as an editor of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as within the larger context of late Ming print culture. The comprehensive portraits that Deng Zhimo created for Xu Xun, Sa Shoujian, and Lü Dongbin by weaving different sets of information into single narratives are indicative of a broader trend in print culture and book consumption in late Ming – bringing together information from numerous sources in order to

compile a useful sourcebook on a specific topic for a wide readership of diverse interests and levels of literacy.

In this chapter, I examine this trend by focusing on Deng Zhimo's *The Iron Tree* and its ties to the lore of its protagonist, the Daoist immortal Xu Xun. I look at how Deng envisioned the intricate dynamic between Xu Xun's hagio-graphical representations, his cult center in Jiangxi, and the Jingming Daoist teaching that he came to personify.² Drawing on historical records, canonical texts, and oral traditions from his home region in Jiangxi, Deng created a standardized, all-inclusive version of the Xu Xun legend that renegotiated the relationship between his local lore as a water deity in Jiangxi, his "sacred geography" in the Xishan region, and his role as the patriarch of the Jingming Daoist sect. This chapter aims to better understand how origin narratives integrated the three pillars that support the reverence of cultural icons – persona, practice, and place – by examining *The Iron Tree* and the Xu Xun lore vis-à-vis Deng Zhimo's publishing career and late Ming print culture. What characterized the reading experience of *The Iron Tree* in late Ming and what role did it play in shaping readers' views of Xu Xun and his cult?

² The teachings of the Jingming Dao sanctify filial piety and personal loyalty as key to self-cultivation, thus attempting to harmonize Confucian mores with the Daoist search for immortality and transcendence. Its doctrine is indebted to the development of a new conceptualization of filial piety during the Tang that ties it closely to political loyalty. In later centuries, it was influenced by the Neo-Confucian discourse of the Song and the notion of the Three Teachings. Although Jingming Dao advocates fundamental Confucian values such as filial piety and devotion to political authority, it still regards worship of the gods and divine guidance (through the instruction of immortals or "perfected" descended to the human world) as crucial conditions for attainment. Jingming Dao was closely connected to the Lingbao liturgical tradition from an early stage, and its practices later draw on Shangqing and Tianshi Daoism, particularly their uses of talismans and charms, as well as on Buddhism. See Akizuki Kanei, *Zhongguo jinshi daojiao de xingcheng*, pp. 177-185; K. M. Schipper, "Taoist Rituals and Local Cults in the T'ang Dynasty," in Michel Strickmann ed., *Tantric and Taoist Studies: in honor of R. A. Stein* (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1985), p. 827-828; Guo Wu 郭武, *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu yanjiu: yi Song, Yuan shehui wei beijing de kaocha* 净明忠孝全书研究：以宋元社会为背景的考察 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005), p. 25, 167-168, and 188.

2. Deng Zhimo and the World of Late Ming Publishing

Deng Zhimo is remembered as one of the most prolific popular writers-compilers of the Wanli era.³ Although Deng spent most of his career in the Jianyang area in Fujian, he originally hailed from the Poyang Lake region in Jiangxi Province, which was also the legendary Xu Xun's hometown and cult center, as well as the heart of the Jingming Daoist sect.⁴ From the scant information we have on his early life, we know that Deng failed the examinations and suffered a series of personal losses, including the deaths of his parents and later his wife and children. He also suffered from a prolonged illness that left him “emaciated as a skeleton,” according to his friends.⁵ After several years of schooling and travel, Deng found work as a writer and editor at the Cuiqing tang 萃慶堂 in Jianyang, which was managed at the time by Yu Zhangde 余彰德 (*zi* Siquan 泗泉), a prominent Jianyang printer and a first cousin of Yu Xiangdou. During the first two decades of the seventeenth century, Deng authored or co-produced (that is, annotated, edited, collated, and contributed to) over thirty works.⁶ During the Cuiqing tang's years of activity in the Wanli period, this publishing house produced at least seventy works, a third of which might be termed literary: anthologies of individual writings, compendiums of anecdotes

³ Deng Zhimo (courtesy name Jingnan 号景南) used a number of sobriquets, among them Zhuxi sanren 竹溪散人, Zhuxi sansheng 竹溪散生, Zhuxi fengyue zhuren 竹溪風月主人, and Baizhuo shengren 百拙生人. See Bai Yiwen, *Wanming xianzhuang xiaoshuo yanjiu*, pp. 69-87.

⁴ Some sources claim that Deng hails from Raozhou 饒州, Anren county 安仁縣, Jiangxi, whereas other sources argue that he is from Yuzhang, near Nanchang, Jiangxi. The *Sikuquanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要 presents Deng as a man of Rao'an (饒安人), a conjecture which Sun Kaidi regarded with suspicion; see Bai Yiwen, pp. 75-77. In any case, scholars agree that Deng Zhimo was very familiar both with the region and local lore surrounding Xu Xun. According to Wang Xiaoyang, there was a Xu Xun temple in the village in which Deng Zhimo grew up (Raozhou); see Wang, “Deng Zhimo ‘Tieshuji’ de ling yi banben yu laiyan,” p. 119.

⁵ Bai Yiwen, p. 82.

⁶ Miao Yonghe 繆咏禾, *Mingdai chuban shi gao* 明代出版史稿 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2000), pp. 223-224.

and jottings, and drama miscellanies. Several credit Deng Zhimo as the author, annotator, or compiler. This fact prompts certain scholars to regard Deng as the Cuiqing tang's "house writer."

Since information on Deng Zhimo's life is scarce, and no biography of him exists, we must extract what we can from his works and correspondences, as well as mine the writings of those in Deng's personal and professional circles. Deng was known primarily for his work as collator and editor, and less appreciated for the few works he authored. Kathryn Lowry describes Deng Zhimo as "an author of Daoist novels who had a hand in compiling a variety of practical and not-so-practical guides, ranging from literary primers to letter-writing guides to miscellanies of writing on courtesans and romance."⁷ This type of work was in great demand at the time and extremely profitable, since, as Dorothy Ko notes, "the inadequacy of age-old moral guidelines in providing for everyday survival created a volcano of demands for a new form of knowledge – practical, know-how guides."⁸ According to Lucille Chia, Deng's works showcase "his marketable skill as a quick producer of entertaining middle-brow pieces that sold well in the book markets, especially if they were packaged with some care."⁹

Lowry includes Deng Zhimo in her category of "journeyman-editors" who were engaged mostly in anthologizing and editing. Deng's life and work illustrate the close cultural and economic ties between the urban centers of commercial publishing in late Ming. During this period, the publishing industry and the culture of the reading public were concomitantly transregional and local in scope. Regional specialization, local lore, and shared trans-urban culture contributed to the proliferation of local gazetteers and travel guides to local sights. At the

⁷ Kathryn A. Lowry, *The Tapestry of Popular Songs in 16-17th Century China: reading, imitation, and desire* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 40-41.

⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 34.

⁹ Chia, *Printing for Profit*, pp. 160-161.

same time, book production and consumption around the turn of the seventeenth century was remarkably transregional. The Yu family operated branches of its publishing empire not only in its hometown of Jianyang, but also in Nanjing; since its various branches could exchange printing blocks, Nanjing books were reprinted in Fujian and vice versa.¹⁰ Not only did the profitability of the book trade itself rested on the transportation of materials and commodities, but the groups and individuals at the center of this industry themselves also traveled between these centers. Deng Zhimo, for instance, traveled back and forth between Jiangxi and Fujian.¹¹

Deng collated and contributed to *leishu*, anthologies of stories and anecdotes accompanied by illustrations and rhymed verse that proved very popular in late Ming.¹² For instance, Deng compiled seven of the eight editions of the *Gushi baimei* 故事白眉, wrote a sequel titled *Gushi huangmei* 故事黃眉, and collaborated with Yu Yingqiu 餘應虬 (of the Cuiqing tang) on the *Pangxun siliu gushi yuan* 旁訓四六古事苑.¹³ The array of topics that the *Gushi yuan* covers mirrors the scope of contemporaneous encyclopedias, ranging from astronomy and geography to clothes and plants.¹⁴ This type of compilations were not limited to worldly affairs, but often included sections on the divine and otherworldly. Volume 8 of *Gushi*

¹⁰ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 44.

¹¹ See for instance his correspondence with Chen Guoyong 陈国用 (“與陳君國用”) in his collection *Qie zhushi Deyuji* 鍤註釋得愚集, *juan* 5 (reprinted edition in the series *Ming Qing shanben xiaoshuo congkan* 明清善本小说丛刊, vol. 2).

¹² The target audience of these works is unclear; the arrangement of the anecdotes and verse, as well as the simple language and didactic content, suggest that they might have been aimed at children and teachers. However, since these anthologies share some of the characteristics of contemporaneous illustrated *xiaoshuo* and drama miscellanies, their appeal may have been even wider.

¹³ Chia, *Printing for Profit*, pp. 235-236.

¹⁴ This work was published in 1617 by the Side tang 四德堂 printing house and was later included in the *Siku quanshu*. See Deng Zhimo, *Lanxue tang Gushi yuan dingben* 蘭雪堂古事苑定本, in *Siku quanshu*, volume 1247.

yuan for instance is dedicated to buddhas and immortals (*xianfo* 仙佛), deities (*shenxian* 神仙), Buddhists (*fanshi* 梵釋), and spirits (*guishen* 鬼神). It briefly surveys the lives of gods and immortals, their heavenly abodes and paradises, quickly shifting between traditions, places, and eras without any apparent organizing logic.¹⁵ Throughout this volume, Deng quotes from and refers to the classics, Buddhist sutras, and anthologies like *Shenxian zhuan*, *Liexian zhuan*, and *Soushen ji*. In its terse, clattered heaping of information on gods, immortals, and spirits, this volume – and the *Gushi yuan* in general – seems to be inviting the cursory gaze of the moderately-educated, without presuming to provide any profound or comprehensive discussions.

The wide spectrum of topics that Deng Zhimo's *leishu* covered and the diversity of his readership was made possible by a book culture wherein, as Shang Wei argues, "appropriation, adaptation, and incorporation became the norms of commercial publishing, a large repository of common references appeared. These in turn often served as the sources for other texts. No books embody this practice better than the daily life encyclopedias and literary miscellaneous, which synthesize almost all the literary and nonliterary genres prevalent during the late Ming period."¹⁶

Catering to the same type of leisure reading, Deng also took part in producing a series of "contests" (*zhengqi* 争奇), illustrated anthologies of prose and verse on various topics.¹⁷ Each anthology opens with a preface in grass script, followed by a series of short prose stories, essays, and poems, some by notable writers and poets. Despite their largely frivolous bent, these short

¹⁵ See *Gushi yuan*, pp. 153-162.

¹⁶ Shang Wei, "Jin Ping Mei and Late Ming Print culture," p. 190.

¹⁷ These "contests" were published by the Cuiqing tang as well as by other Jianyang firms, such as Yang Jiang's 楊江 Qingbai tang 清白堂. He is credited with collating and contributing to at least five such anthologies: 山水争奇 (mountains and water), 風月争奇 (wind and moon), 梅雪争奇 (plum and snow), 花鳥争奇 (flowers and birds), 童婉争奇 (graceful child), 蔬果争奇 (vegetables and fruit). See reprints of this series of anthologies in the *Ming Qing shanben xiaoshuo congkan* 明清善本小說叢刊 published by the Tianyi chubanshe yinxing 天一出版社印行.

and amusing pieces showcase Deng Zhimo's extensive learning while taking a jibe at current affairs and social malaise. According the prefaces of these books, this series enjoyed commercial success at the time – that is, if we take these statements at face value, and not consider them merely advertisements.

In the course of his writing-editing career, Deng also produced practical guide books, including several collections of romantic poetry and love letters (*qingshu* 情書).¹⁸ These guide books did not simply consist of a dull collection of letters; in the *Gracious Love Letter* (*Fengyun qingshu* 豐韻情書, 1618), for instance, Deng adds a narrative preface to every correspondence, as though to provide a social context for the letter exchange, as well as commentary and a didactic concluding remark which “states the lessons to be drawn both for social deportment and for understanding how writing can shape powerful emotions for passion and longing.”¹⁹ Kathryn Lowry notes that the material included in these miscellanies was duplicated in epistolary guides, modified and repackaged – a typical phenomenon in late Ming print culture. Lowry further writes that “Deng Zhimo's miscellanies were loosely based on the format of the letter-writing manual but expanded the scope of the commentary to teach readers how to read and appreciate the nature of writing that brings to light their “innermost feelings” (*youqing* 幽情).”²⁰ According to Lowry, “the reading apparatus in Deng Zhimo's *Gracious Love Letter* facilitates different

¹⁸ Such as *A Casual Reader* (*Sasa bian* 洒洒編), *Gracious Love Letter* (*Fengyun qingshu* 豐韻情書), and *Three Marvelous Models for Each Kind of Letter* (*yizha sanqi* 一札三奇, also published by Cuiqing tang).

¹⁹ Kathryn A. Lowry, “Duplicating the Strength of Feeling: the Circulation of Qingshu in Late Ming” in *Writing and Materiality*, pp. 244-245.

²⁰ Lowry, “Duplicating the Strength of Feeling,” p. 244.

modes of reading among an expanding literate audience, who might approach the book as a source of models for writing their own letters, as didactic literature, or as entertainment.”²¹

It is noteworthy that the works that Deng authored, collated, annotated, and edited did not circulate in manuscript form prior to their publication, but were produced specifically for mass commercial production, with a wide potential readership in mind. As Shang Wei notes, “essential to the phenomenon of the rise of the editor was the emergence of a variety of compiled books, books in which the editors incorporated miscellaneous materials from multiple sources, especially from the best-sellers of the day, in order to meet and cultivate the needs of the market.”²² The fact that commercial considerations and the demands of the book market directed some – if not all – of Deng’s projects should not mark them as less worthy of our attention. On the contrary, they provide an interesting opportunity to explore the interests and demands of late-Ming audiences (and adjust our view to better understand the reader-viewers’ “period eye”).²³ Moreover, Deng’s commercial bent offers important context for his Saints Trilogy.

In a span of two years at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Deng Zhimo produced three independent narrative texts recounting the lives of Daoist saints: *The Flying Sword* (about Lü Dongbin), *The Enchanted Date* (about Sa Shoujian 薩守堅), and *The Iron Tree* (about Xu Xun). All three were published around 1603-1604 by the Yu-family owned Cuiqing tang 萃慶堂 publishing house in Jianyang, Fujian Province.²⁴ They share a similar layout and paratextual

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shang Wei, “Jin Ping Mei and Late Ming Print culture,” p. 190.

²³ See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁴ *Tale of the Iron Tree* apparently proved to be a commercial success, since it was reprinted in 1604 by Cuiqing tang and again in the second half of the seventeenth century by the Zhengsheng tang 正聲堂. Aside from the preface, these editions are almost identical; the Cuiqing tang printing house probably used the same woodblocks for both editions. Deng’s preface is identical in both the 1603 and 1604 editions, though its title is slightly different: it

format; all three open with a preface by Deng Zhimo in calligraphy, followed by a main narrative composed of between thirteen to fifteen chapters (printed full-page in eleven columns), and accompanied by about a dozen full-page illustrations. Evoking the notions of the “banished immortal” and the Three Teachings, they share the same basic narrative structure and raise similar concerns regarding Daoist self-cultivation, asceticism, and the greater good.

Deng Zhimo’s penchant for anthologizing and moralizing underlies his Saints Trilogy. The extent and variety of the material that was available to him in his professional and personal networks in the Jianyang area are evident in the encyclopedic scope of *The Iron Tree*, *The Flying Sword*, and *The Enchanted Date*. As an editor, collator, and house-writer of the Yu-family owned Cuiqing tang, Deng Zhimo had access to an extremely wide array of sources. From extant bibliographical lists, we know that the Ming repertory of the Cuiqing tang included histories, medical works, compendiums of literati writings, anthologies of essays and poems, courtroom story-collections, and narrative texts. The bibliography of the Yu-owned Maiwang guan, operated by Deng’s friend and colleague Yu Xiangdou, includes anything from the classics and literature to medical and geographical guides. More relevant to our case study below are the titles grouped under the category of “immortality school” (*xianjia* 仙家). These include 145 works, among them essential Daoist works (such as the *zhengao* 真誥), hagiographies (like the *Qizhen zhuan* 七真傳), sacred geographies (such as the *Wuyue tu* 五岳圖), and works on inner alchemy (the *Jindan dayao* 金丹大要, for instance).²⁵

reads “Yuzhang Tieshuji yin” 豫章鐵樹記引 in the first edition and “Xu zhenjun tieshuji yin” 許真君鐵樹記引 in the 1604 edition.

²⁵ See Zhao Qimei 赵琦美, “Maiwang guan shumu” 脈望館書目, in *Congshu jicheng xubian* 叢書集成續編 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe 上海書店出版社, 2014, vol. 68), pp. 303-427. Interestingly, although nearly all of the titles under the section “immortality school” are evidently Daoist or pseudo-Daoist works, a few titles also carry the character 佛, though I do not know if the texts themselves actually pertain to Buddhism. This

While the majority of the works Deng produced or co-produced were composed of texts that he only collated, edited, or annotated (see section III), the Saints Trilogy seem to have been the only full-length narratives that Deng authored.²⁶ Despite the *xiaoshuo* format that somewhat obscures the internal hybridity of these works, they draw upon a wide spectrum of textual, oral, and visual sources. By weaving historical data and doctrinal discussions with local lore into entertaining, illustrated narratives, the Trilogy appealed to a wide audience of diverse backgrounds, perhaps more so than any other work that Deng Zhimo produced. The broad range of sources Deng used – hagiographic, historiographic, literary, doctrinal – reflects his extensive learning as well as his penchant for collating. It is equally important to note that Deng produced these narratives directly for the book market, with his target readership in mind. As I argued in the previous chapter and will further stress in this chapter, this type of hybrid writing produced for commercial publishing is characteristic of late-Ming Jiangnan book culture.

book list also includes a separate category of Buddhist works (called 佛家), but it is considerably smaller than the 仙家 section, with only 36 works. In any case, the inclusion of certain Buddhist (or pseudo-Buddhist) works in the immortality section showcases the Three Teachings mentality of the bibliographer who compiled this book list in late Ming.

²⁶ For an annotated bibliography of Deng Zhimo's works, see Chen Xudong 陈旭东, "Deng Zhimo zhishu zhijian lu 邓志谟著述知见录" (Fujian shiyuan daxue xuebao 福建师范大学学报, no. 4, 2012), pp. 132-139. See also the doctoral dissertation of Bai Yiwen 白以文, *Wanming xianzhuo xiaoshuo zhi yanjiu* 晚明仙傳小說之研究 (National Chengchi University, 2006), pp. 27-31.

3. Narrating an Immortal's Life: *The Iron Tree*

3.1. From Episodic to Cohesive Narrative

How to recount a tale that has been told in countless ways through the ages? To “narrate,” argues Hayden White, is to impose a structure and “an order of meaning” on a sequence of events.²⁷ As I mentioned earlier, Deng Zhimo drew on a vast array of sources to create a coherent retelling of Xu Xun’s life in *The Iron Tree*. Generally speaking, Throughout Xu Xun’s hagiographical tradition, the “kernels” of his life and saintly deeds were tied together rather tenuously, with little underlying logic. This is particularly apparent in depictions of the miracles that Xu Xun performed; since they do not serve as key “joints” in his personal history, there is great variability in their details and order of appearance.²⁸ Certain earlier texts even divided the life of Xu into separate sections or chapters. The *Eighty-Five Transformations* parses the life of Xu into eighty-five brief episodes (*hua* 化), each accompanied by a heptasyllabic poem (*lüshi* 律詩) that expands on the prose section preceding it.²⁹ This format somewhat resembles the *Book of Transformations*, an auto-hagiography of the god Wenchang, studied by Terry Kleeman.³⁰ This division into independent episodes allows the text more flexibility in representing the various

²⁷ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (*Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative, Autumn, 1980), p. 9.

²⁸ The episodic nature of hagiographies and particularly the shuffling of miracles attributed to the saint and repetition are also very common in the Buddhist hagiographic tradition, as well as in European accounts of Christian saints. See Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints: an introduction to hagiography* (London, New York Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907); Cynthia Hahn, *Portrait on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth to the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 39-41; Koichi Shinohara, “Stories of Miraculous Images and Paying Respect to the Three Jewels: a discourse on image worship in seventh-century China”, in: Granoff and Shinohara eds, *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts* (Vancouver BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), pp. 180-222.

²⁹ Schipper suggests that these poems may have been revealed through spirit writing. Although this is a fascinating possibility, I think that much more information is required to substantiate it. See Schipper, *Index du Yunji qiqian: projet Tao-tsang* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1981), p. 108, n. 3.

³⁰ Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale*, p. 66.

aspects of Xu's legend. It also renders the text open-ended: instead of trying to maintain some kind of narrative unity, this division allows the text to insert various types of information throughout Xu Xun's life story (for instance, descriptions of ceremonies at his temple, imperial decrees, etc.). The episodic form of Xu Xun's hagiographies is particularly apparent in the pictorial hagiographies *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan* and *Zhenxian shiji* that parse Xu's life into separate scenes composed of text and image.³¹ Lastly, the year-by-year account of Xu Xun's life in his *nianbiao*, titled *Xu zhenjun linianbiao* 許真君歷年表, not only breaks down his hagiography into even smaller segments, but also draws attention to the broader temporal framework of his life.³²

One of the key contributions of Deng Zhimo to the Xu Xun lore was making sense of the assortment of anecdotes and disparate episodes that made up his earlier hagiographies, and weaving them into a cohesive narrative. After all, what is life if not a collection of moments (episodes) within one long continuum (narrative)? In the course of this process, Deng incorporated a swath of information, much of which was previously inaccessible to lay urbanite readers, into the format of a *xiaoshuo* narrative. What transforms this sequence of events into a narrative is an underlying causality, the highlighting of meaningful connections between these events that are steered by a larger purpose – in the case of Xu Xun, the divine concern for the

³¹ Akizuki Kanei dates this text around 1295; see Akizuki Kanei, *Chūgoku kinsei Dōkyō no keisei*, p. 16. However, Xu Wei argues that it is difficult to ascertain the dating of texts that were later included in the Daoist canon in 1445. See Xu Wei, "Jingming Dao zushi tuxiang yanjiu," p. 119.

³² The *Xu zhenjun linianbiao* is composed of a table juxtaposing Xu Xun's age and life events with dates and concurrent political affairs. It is included in the Wanshougong temple gazetteer "Xiaoyao shan Wanshougong zhi" 逍遙山萬壽宮志, juan 3 in *Beijing tushuguan zangzhen ben nianpu congkan* 北京圖書館藏珍本年譜叢刊, volume 8, pp. 17-45.

wellbeing of humanity.³³ The following paragraphs take a closer look at how Deng Zhimo molded the various strands of the Xu Xun lore into the format of a narrative text.

3.2. Time and Space: *The Iron Tree's* Cosmological Framework

The Iron Tree follows the formulaic structure of origin narratives that I have outlined in Chapter 1, framing Xu Xun's life story within a broader cosmological spatial-temporal framework. By embracing this perspective, the book diverges from Xu Xun's long hagiographic tradition. Tang and Song hagiographies of Xu Xun limit themselves to the span of human life: they direct their gaze at the life of Xu, his progenitors, his acolytes, and his descendants.³⁴ From the laconic biographical data with which they begin their accounts (including names, ancestry, origins, etc.) down to Xu's legacy, these hagiographies remain loyal to a historiographical scheme that centers on earthly, human experience.³⁵ Moreover, their narrative follows Xu's (and his followers') actions chronologically and spatially without digression, sometimes centering on particular key moments in his life.³⁶ In most pre-Ming hagiographies of Xu, narrative time correlates with Xu

³³ Hayden White writes that "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats... narrativity, in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine." See White, "The Value of Narrativity," p. 18.

³⁴ These include Xu Xun's hagiography in the *Taiping guangji*, the *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao*, the *Eighty-Five Transformations*, Bai Yuchan's hagiography of Xu, and Zhao Daoyi's hagiography of Xu.

³⁵ Li Fengmao looks at early medieval life-stories of extraordinary people within the context of the 别傳 and 方士 writing style. He notes that this period saw an explosion of biographies of extraordinary people which put particular emphasis on the human, personal traits of the protagonists, and stressed the historical veracity of the accounts. See *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 19-20.

³⁶ For instance, the focus of the first full-length hagiography of Xu, the *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao*, is on Xu's work as exorcist. The text skips Xu Xun's miraculous birth story and jumps from a list of basic biographical details to Xu's first exorcistic endeavor. It also leaves out a key episode in Xu Xun's life – his service as magistrate of Jingyang. By contrast, most hagiographies describe his miraculous birth and his unusual childhood, as well as his service in public office.

Xun's lived experience: any event or information that strays from this chronological line is brought into the narrative in the form of a "flashback" or an addendum. For instance, in these earlier hagiographies, the stories of Xu Xun's spiritual progenitors, Langong and Chenmu, are recounted only when Xu Xun meets Chenmu, as a "flashback."

By contrast, *The Iron Tree* depicts the life of Xu from a broader, cosmological perspective: here Xu's life and work are not framed by the span of earthly human life, but by a boundless, eternal universe, where space is measured in realms of existence and time is measured in eons.³⁷ Our point of view is external, as narrative time equals universal time: we follow events as they occur, not through the prism of Xu Xun's life.³⁸ *The Iron Tree* is an "origin story" in more than one sense. The first third of the narrative is entirely dedicated to establishing Xu Xun's "prehistory," from his divine and saintly progenitors (the Lord of Filiality, Langong, Chenmu) to his earthly ancestors. In fact, Xu Xun only appears for the first time at the end of chapter 4.

Following the same pattern as other Wanli-era origin narratives discussed in the previous chapter, *The Iron Tree* opens with an introduction of the Three Teachings, followed by a scene in the divine realm (in this case, a celebration of Laozi's birthday).³⁹ Here we learn about Xu Xun's

³⁷ Li Fengmao discusses this transition in relation to Deng Zhimo's *Tieshuji* and *Zhouzaji* in *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 289-296. Regarding the cosmological introduction of the *Tieshuji*, see also Liu Yanyan 刘彦彦 and Long Ce 龙珊, "Lue lun Ming-Qing xiaoshuo yu zongjiao shengtai" 略论明清小说与宗教生态 (Nanjing: *Ming-Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小说研究, 2011, no. 4), pp. 66-79.

³⁸ Jin Shengtan called the technique of providing background details before they become relevant to the plot "advance insertion" (*dao cha fa* 倒插法). See Rolson, *How to Read the Chinese Novel*, p. 140. Regarding narrative time, see Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984); and Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: narrative structure in fiction and film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 62-63.

³⁹ For instance, while in earlier hagiographies we learn about Langong and the divine chain of transmission only when Xu Xun meets Chenmu (as a "flashback"), in the *Tieshuji* we see the entire chain of transmission as it occurs: a decision is made in the celestial realm, then an envoy descends to pass on the knowledge to Langong, who then transmits it to Chenmu. Li Fengmao claims that this divine framework is a common narrative tool in fiction and

prehistory, so to speak: the stellar god Venus relates a prophecy foreseeing the rise to power of a dangerous demon in Jiangxi. Laozi envisages Xu Xun's spiritual potential as antidote to that of a future demonic disturbance – the Dragon of Poyang Lake. However, the gods must initiate a sequence of events that will eventually bring about Xu's successful vanquishing of the demon. Hence, with the approval of the Jade Emperor, the stellar god Venus descends to the world to reincarnate, while the Lord of Filiality ushers a chain of transmission of divine knowledge that will eventually furnish Xu Xun with the tools to defeat the Dragon of Poyang Lake and re-ascend to heaven.⁴⁰ Thus, from the standpoint of eternity, the narrative directs our gaze from the cosmos to the divine pantheon, then to the “world of dust” of human society (where we linger the longest), and finally back to the divine realm. This trajectory also correlates the inter-realm journey of a “descended immortal” or “banished immortal.”⁴¹

3.3. Xu Xun's Career: Moral Causation and Divine Guidance

This shift in perspective from the human to the universal goes hand in hand with a new causality underlying Xu's life and saintly career. The cosmological framework characterizing *The Iron Tree* introduces a new deterministic causality into Xu's legend that places enormous importance on divine guidance of human history. As noted above, the course of Xu Xun's life is laid out before the readers long before Xu Xun himself appears in the narrative. The divine looms large

drama to introduce protagonists who descended to earth from heaven and are destined to ascend. See *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, the stellar god Venus (太白金星) also descend to the human world in several other late-Ming narrative texts, short stories, dramas, and *baojuan*. Among the narrative texts featuring Venus descending to earth are *Journey to the West (Xiyouji)*, *Shuihu zhuan*, *Journey to the Western Ocean (Xiyangji)*, *Origin Tale of the Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Southern Sea*, *Journey to the North*, and *Journey to the South*.

⁴¹ See Li Fengmao, *Wuru yu zhejiang: Liuchao Sui Tang Daojiao wenxue lunji* 誤入與謫降: 六朝隋唐道教文學論集 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1996), pp. 247-285.

in most of the earlier Xu Xun hagiographies, glimpsed in his encounters with immortal envoys and in the divine knowledge he receives, but it is no more than a shadow moving in the background of Xu's life. However, in *The Iron Tree*, the divine takes central stage. Though *The Iron Tree* is not the first source (textual or otherwise) to portray Xu Xun's ascent as predestined, it is the first narrative to shift the focus away from personal karmic causality and rely on a divinely-guided, predestined trajectory as an organizing principle.

Equally important to Xu Xun's path to attainment are the concepts of inherited moral debt and collectively-accumulated merit; the benevolence of Xu's ancestors is portrayed as key to his eventual ascension. Karmic causality is a major concern of late-Ming *xiaoshuo* and plays a particularly important role in Deng's Saints Trilogy.⁴² The depiction of Xu Xun's virtuous father and grandfather in *The Iron Tree* seem to be a new addition to the Xu lore. According to chapter 4 in *The Iron Tree*, Xu Xun's grandfather, Xu Yan 許琰, was an illustrious, benevolent doctor who saved multitudes of people from starvation by devising a special pill (called "hunger-staving cinnabar," *jiujidan* 救飢丹). The narrative goes on to describe the great generosity of Xu Xun's father, Xu Su 許肅, who not only shared his grain with his starving neighbors, but also refrained from taking a gold-filled purse that he found on the roadside, eventually returning it to its rightful owner.⁴³ As our narrator exclaims: "behold these acts of hidden merit; how could they not be rewarded?" (你看這等的陰功, 豈無報應). With the unprecedented detail with which Xu

⁴² Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 147.

⁴³ Deng also used this story in Chapter 8 of *Zhouzao ji* to illustrate the generosity and virtue of Sa Shoujian, thus demonstrating once more the notorious tendency in late-Ming commercial publishing to duplicate and reuse materials.

Xun's virtuous ancestors are depicted, inherited accumulated merit is brought forward as another major factor in Xu Xun's attainment for the first time in his lore.

Filial piety, a key aspect of Xu Xun's image as patriarch of the Jingming Daoist sect, is given new importance in *The Iron Tree*. While only a few Tang anecdotes briefly portray Xu as a devoted son, his numerous hagiographies do not describe his filial actions at all. Deng clearly saw this aspect in his legend as an important ingredient in his life story, though still eclipsed by Xu's exorcistic exploits and inner alchemical practices. *The Iron Tree* deviates from the source material by including additional secondary characters (other family members) and episodes. Xu Xun is depicted not only as a devoted son, who refuses official position in order to care for his parents, but also as a devoted brother and father. In chapter 7, Xu Xun commands the construction of a house for his widowed sister and takes his two young nephews under his wing. In the following chapter, Xu Xun arranges the marriage of his daughter to one of his disciples and marries off his son to the daughter of a retired official whom Wu Meng's powers of divination saved from drowning. These episodes do not contribute much to the storyline, nor are they essential to the development of the narrative. It is very likely that Deng sought to expand Xu Xun's character in order to make the narrative more engaging, but more importantly, these additions betray an attempt to present a vision of Xu Xun as the ideal filial son and brother, Confucian scholar, and Daoist saint, thus bringing his hagiography in line with prevalent views of Xu around the turn of the seventeenth century (as evident in *biji* and local gazetteers). It is also the most ardent attempt to explain and justify Xu Xun's role as patriarch of the Jingming sect, which advocates filial piety, demonstrating his worthiness of this status not by title alone, but through action.

The most crucial—and iconic—actions that characterize Xu Xun’s career are his philanthropic endeavors. In his numerous hagiographies, as well as in *The Iron Tree*, Xu Xun is celebrated for the various services and miracles he performed for the benefit of the common people in the course of his travels.⁴⁴ Once, according to tradition, he made a spring emerge from sheer rock to ease a drought.⁴⁵ Another time, after enjoying the hospitality of a generous man, Xu Xun painted on the wall of his house a tree which later protected it from calamities and brought prosperity to the kind host.⁴⁶

However, even within Xu Xun’s hagiographies, the role of philanthropic action in the life of an aspiring immortal and its relationship with self-cultivation practices (particularly inner alchemy and ascetic practices) remains contested and unclear. In the *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao*, when encountering a harmful poisonous viper, Xu Xun and Wu Meng welcome this opportunity and joyfully exclaim: “we work assiduously to accumulate merit by helping the people, for if we could not eliminate evil for the benefit of the people, whence will come our virtue (*daode* 道德)?”⁴⁷ This dialog raises the question whether

⁴⁴ Li Fengmao notes that it is the saint’s philanthropic and exorcistic services to the people which make him extraordinary, or *feichang* 非常. See *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵ This miracle is probably related to his roots as a local water god in Jiangxi; see Huang Zhigang 黄芝岗, *Zhongguo de shuishen* 中国的水神 (Taipei: Dongfang wenhua shuju, 1973). It is depicted in both text and image in the *Zhenxian shiji* (plate 1018/37). It is interesting to note how common the motif of making water come out of a rock is in stories of saintly lives. Compare this to the biblical story of Moses slaking the thirst of the Hebrews by drawing water from a rock in the Sinai Desert, or certain Welsh saints (see Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 70 and 105).

⁴⁶ This recurring detail is depicted in Chapter 9 of *Tale of the Iron Tree* and visually depicted in the *Zhenxian shiji* (plate 1018/41).

⁴⁷ 吾等積德累業所冀利民，不能為人除害何以彰餘道德矣。The *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao* (*Xiaodao Wu Xu er zhenjun zhuan* 孝道吳許二真君傳) is included in the Daoist canon (CT 449, 正統道藏, 洞玄部, 譜錄類); see also *Zhonghua Daozang* 中華道藏, volume 46 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2004), pp. 389-393. Although the text itself claims to have been composed in the Tang, Li Fengmao dates this text circa 1047-1101.

helping others is regarded merely as a means for attainment, or as an end in and of itself.⁴⁸ The debate concerning the purposes of, and motivations for, philanthropic action in Daoist self-cultivation had sprung up long before the birth of Xu Xun lore; it can be traced back to Ge Hong's *Baopuzi*.⁴⁹ In the context of the Xu Xun lore, this issue further highlights the tension between Xu's role as protector of the people on the one hand and his function as a deified immortal on the other. The very nature of Daoist attainment – which takes precedent: benevolence or transcendence – is at stake here.

Xu Xun's service as the magistrate of Jingyang forms another avenue of philanthropic action. In this capacity, Xu Xun is portrayed as an ideal magistrate and judge, evoking a recurring model of the righteous magistrate who not only devote himself to the wellbeing of the common people, but also proves to be a brilliant detective. Although Xu Xun's position as magistrate of Jingyang is recounted in most of his hagiographies, *The Iron Tree* expands its depiction along the lines of courtroom storytelling (*gong'an* 公案). In chapter 8, Xu Xun's first order of business as magistrate is punishing the prefect's corrupt officials and rewarding the honest ones. He goes on to solve two complicated cases wherein unfaithful wives attempted to murder their husbands (one of them succeeded, the other's plot was thwarted). These tales, none of which appeared in earlier legends on Xu Xun, draw on courtroom tales and dramas in general and the myth-cycle of the incorruptible Judge Bao in particular. Since courtroom stories and dramas were very popular around the turn of the seventeenth century, and some were printed in

⁴⁸ Akizuki Kanei refers to this issue in *Zhongguo jin shi dao jiao de xing cheng*, pp. 30-31, but he does not develop the discussion further.

⁴⁹ Originally reads: “然覽諸道戒無不云: 欲求長生者, 必欲積善立功, 慈心於物, 恕己及人, 仁逮昆蟲如此乃為有德, 受福於天, 所作必成, 求仙可冀也。” Ge Hong, *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (內篇卷六, 微旨篇) (CT 1176).

anthologies by the Yu-family publishers, it is most likely that Deng Zhimo was very familiar with this genre and sought to tap its popularity.

It is interesting to note that despite the book's emphasis on philanthropy and public service as vital steps to attainment, it does not depict Xu Xun's decision to leave his position as the magistrate of Jingyang as a problem. In fact, Xu's decision to leave office is presented as natural and self-explanatory in all portrayals of his life that I have come across, save one: the abovementioned anonymous *zaju* play *Xu zhenren ba zha feisheng* 許真人拔宅飛昇, printed by a Yu-family publishing house in 1607. In this play, despite Xu's benevolent governance of Jingyang, he seems exasperated by the inefficiency and corruption of his underlings, and daydreams about retiring from office to a secluded place to pursue the Dao. This official-literati cliché is contrasted by a satirical dialog between the yamen clerks, who busy themselves plotting how to take advantage of the people once Xu Xun leaves office. Instead of praising Xu's spiritual devotion, the first act ends by criticizing his betrayal of public duty, offering a bleak forecast for the people he leaves behind to the mercy of the greedy, ruthless yamen thugs. That is not to say that Xu forsakes the people altogether; the next act shows him struggling with a moral dilemma whether to exorcize the dragon or spare its life, eventually deciding that the well-being of the people triumphs over all other moral considerations.

3.4. Tests and Trials: Chasing the Dragon

A third of the narrative of *The Iron Tree* is devoted to Xu Xun's iconic and highly-entertaining pursuit after the Dragon of Poyang Lake, or as he is often called in the narrative - the Sinful Dragon.⁵⁰ The subjugation of this dragon, and other maritime monsters, was a cornerstone of Xu

⁵⁰ This long chase takes up chapters 9 to 14.

Xun's lore already in the earliest stages of his popular reverence. His role as vanquisher of snakes and demons is intimately related to his role as a water deity in the Nanchang region since the Jin era.⁵¹ This exorcistic feat became the highpoint of Xu's numerous hagiographies and a particularly iconic scene celebrated in murals, statues, book illustrations, and fine art. While this pursuit was a staple of Xu Xun mythmaking, Deng Zhimo breathes new life into this memorable story. Unlike the mute, one-dimensional dragon of Xu's earlier hagiographies, *The Iron Tree* regales us with a more complicated, rounded nemesis, an entertaining counterweight to the saintly and thoroughly dull Xu Xun. Deng gives the Sinful Dragon a voice and a personality, painting him more as a trickster rather than truly evil at heart. This chase provides Deng not only with an infallible source of humor and jest, but also with a particularly useful narrative device that carries the plot spatially (from one location to the next) and narratively (from one episode to the next) while maintaining a single plotline.

Above all, it is the magic of self-transformation, or shape-shifting, that makes this iconic chase such a successful narrative arc.⁵² As the story goes, while fleeing from Xu Xun, the mischievous dragon transformed itself into a brown ox and hid in a field; Xu accordingly changed himself into a black ox and charged at it, but the dragon managed to escape.⁵³ Disguised

⁵¹ Xu Xun is naturally not the only dragon-slayer among the many local heroes that Daoism appropriated over the centuries, but he differs from his peers in that his subjugation of the dragon goes back to the early roots of his lore – it is not a later addition. In the history of Daoist hagiographical writing, however, the slaying of snakes and dragons is a rather late phenomenon. See Schipper, “Taoist Ritual and Local Cults of the T'ang Dynasty,” p. 815.

⁵² On transformation or shapeshifting (*bian* 变) in late-Ming origin narrative texts, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

⁵³ This scene echoes the legend of Li Bing, a water deity who – according to legend – transformed himself into an ox in order to subdue a harmful dragon, who likewise changed himself into an ox to fight him. This legend is probably connected to the ancient custom of sacrificing oxen to pacify river gods. See Poul Andersen, *The Demon Chained Under Turtle Mountain: the History and Mythology of the Chinese River Spirit Wuzhiqi* (Berlin: Verlag, 2001), p. 73. Interestingly, Andersen mentions a group of seven iron pillars arranged in the shape of the Big Dipper placed in proximity to iron oxen by the western gate of Puzhou city, near a temple for the ancient King Yu. See Andersen, p. 81. For an incomplete list of water gods, see Huang Zhigang, pp. 25-27. On Chinese flood myths, see Deborah Lynn

as a human, the dragon tried to extract information from Xu Xun's unsuspecting disciples, who divulged that Xu's sword is useless against gourds. Hence, the demons in the dragon's entourage transformed themselves into gourds and hid along the river. Xu, of course, saw through this ruse and hacked them to pieces. The dragon once more changed into a man, this time successfully fooling Magistrate Jia of Changsha into accepting him as a son-in-law. Xu Xun, however, discovered his new hiding place, and – masquerading as a doctor – managed to gain entry into the Jia household and capture the dragon.⁵⁴ Finally, in order to prevent the dragon from ever causing harm again, Xu tied him to an iron pillar, on which he cast a demon-subduing charm.⁵⁵ Lastly, a prophecy guarantees Xu Xun's return lest the dragon escapes and causes harm again.

Modern and pre-modern readers of *The Iron Tree* will probably be reminded of another chase marked by a comical series of shapeshifting: Erlang's pursuit after Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West*. The myth cycle of Erlang is in fact closely related to local Jiangxi and Sichuan reverence of water deities and to the Xu Xun lore.⁵⁶ According to certain local legends, Erlang was the son of the water deity Li Bing.⁵⁷ Another famous dragon-queller worth mentioning in this context is Nezha, who, according to his origin story, killed the son of the dragon king.⁵⁸ According to Meir Shahar, “the legends of the Chinese child-god Nezha might

Porter, *From Deluge to Discourse: myth, history, and the generation of Chinese fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Not only can Xu Xun change his form, but his weapons can transform as well. In the course of this chase, his sword shape-shifts into a dragon. In a way, Xu Xun's sword functions as a religious weapon, a “treasure tool,” *faqi* 法器. See Li Fengmao, p. 101.

⁵⁵ In some of Xu Xun's early hagiographies, such as the Tang-era *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao*, the iron pillar is made of the dragon's blood.

⁵⁶ Huang Zhigang, *Zhongguo de shuishen*, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁷ Huang Zhigang, *Zhongguo de shuishen*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God: the Chinese Nezha and his Indian Origins* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), pp. 1-2. A key aspect of Nezha's myth cycle is the animosity between Nezha and his father, culminating in

have been influenced by the myths of his Indian counterpart Kṛṣṇa.”⁵⁹ Both Nezha and Kṛṣṇa defeat a dragon at the tender age of seven; in the *Harivaṃśa* supplement to the Indian saga the *Mahābhārata*, the young Kṛṣṇa subjugates the dragon (nāga) Kāliya which inhabits the Yamunā pool.⁶⁰

The association of dragons with water and rain has ancient roots in both China and India. However, while popular and later Daoist legends often regarded dragons as potentially harmful agents who use their control of water to harm mankind, the Buddhist nāgas were celebrated as guardians of the Buddha who shielded him from water.⁶¹ The mid-Ming illustrated hagiography of the Buddha Sakyamuni, *Shishi yuanliu*, and a series of murals at the temple Jueyan si in Ningbo depict the Buddha vanquishing a serpent; what is more, he is depicted meditating on a throne made of seven dragons.⁶² The portrayals of dragons in these hagiographic depictions of the Buddha are somewhat ambivalent, merging the demonic tendencies of the Chinese *long* with the divine aspects of the Indian nāga.⁶³ By late Ming, the Daoist subjugation of demonic dragons and the Buddhist harnessing of protective dragons seem to have merged in the popular imagination.

Nezha’s suicide and patricide. In this respect, his legend stands in stark contrast to the Filial Dao associated with Xu Xun. However, in China they are both revered as protectors of the state; Tang-period tantric texts depict Nezha as a warrior prince who heads a fierce army in defense of the country and the Dharma. See Shahar, pp. 168-170.

⁵⁹ Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God*, p. 185.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 176-178.

⁶¹ Lowell W. Bloss, “The Buddha and the Nāga: A Study in Buddhist Folk Religiosity” (*History of Religions*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Aug., 1973), pp. 36-53.

⁶² Lesbre, pp. 77-78.

⁶³ Lesbre, p. 79.

Xu Xun's chase after the Sinful Dragon takes up the last part of the narrative of *The Iron Tree* (chapters 9-14), and thus functions as a *rite de passage* for Xu Xun, his final test on the path to attainment. Nevertheless, Deng Zhimo sets the stage for this storyline already in the beginning of the narrative, when recounting the history of Xu Xun's spiritual progenitor Langong in chapter 2. After the saintly Langong was entrusted with divine knowledge and methods that he was ordered to pass on to Chenmu and consequently Xu Xun, the powerful Fire Dragon (*huolong* 火龍) sought, unsuccessfully, to steal it from Langong. This episode not only lays the groundwork for later events in the narrative, but also serves as a prelude for Xu Xun's struggle with the Dragon of Poyang Lake. Moreover, this scene demonstrates the effectiveness of the esoteric knowledge that is destined to reach Xu Xun in the following chapters. It also paints Langong as something more than a one-dimensional, saintly transmitter of knowledge, and explains why the Jade Emperor bestows upon him the title the Radiant Filial King (*xiaoming wang* 孝明王).

While *The Iron Tree* is not the only Xu Xun hagiography to include minor skirmishes between Xu Xun and dragons or snakes prior to the battle with the Dragon of Poyang Lake, it is the first to transform these previously disparate struggles between the demonic and the divine into a chronological, causal chain of events that eventually brings about Xu's vanquishing of the Dragon.⁶⁴ Considering that the dragon's disastrous behavior is the reason for Venus's descent to the world as Xu, the dragon is, in a way, the entire legend's *raison d'être*.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ As prelude to Xu Xun's battle with the Sinful Dragon, this episode functions as "displaying the bait" (*nongyin fa* 弄引法) and "direct repetition" (*zhengfan fa* 正犯法) in Jin Shengtan's terms.

⁶⁵ Guo Daiying 郭黛暎, "Yi fan xian zheng: lun Deng Zhimo Daojiao xiaoshuo zhong de fanmian juese" 以反顯正：論鄧志謨道教小說中的反面角色 (*Qing huazhong wenxuebao*, no. 2, 2008), pp. 205-208.

The Iron Tree also deviates from the rest of the Xu Xun lore by portraying the Dragon of Poyang Lake as originally a human being who was corrupted by supra-human powers he acquired accidentally. Chapter 9 tells of a certain Zhang Kun 張酷, who once crossed a river by boat. After a great gust of wind overturned his boat, Zhang made it to a sandy bank, where he swallowed a precious gem to suppress his hunger. Little did he know that this gem was actually the Fire Dragon's egg. Within a month, Zhang's body began to shed its human characteristics and acquired magical skills of shapeshifting. Nevertheless, Zhang abused his newly-acquired powers by terrorizing the local people, eating them, and seducing innocent women. Yet his greatest crime—and the immediate cause of his clashing with Xu Xun—is disrupting the waterways in Jiangxi by bringing down floods. These actions earned him the title of Sinful Dragon (*nielong* 孽龍) within the narrative. By depicting the famous Dragon of Poyang Lake as originally a regular human being, Deng further stresses the notion that personal effort and morality are the decisive factors in one's ascension to the divine or his degeneration into the demonic. It is human action—albeit empowered by supra-human skills—that separates the bestial and demonic (*chu* 畜 and *yao* 妖) from the ordinary (*fan* 凡) and the divine (*xian* 仙 and *shen* 神). Moreover, Deng contrasts the relationship between Xu Xun and his progenitors with that of the Sinful Dragon and the Fire Dragon: whereas the saintly Langong and Chenmu were following divine instructions in transmitting to Xu Xun esoteric knowledge and methods, the root of the Sinful Dragon's power lies in accidentally consuming the Fire Dragon's egg. Hence the narrative legitimizes Xu Xun's rise to power while delegitimizing its foe.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Guo Daiying, "Yi fan xian zheng," pp. 206-208.



Figure 9: Xu Xun fights the Sinful Dragon of Poyang Lake, *The Iron Tree*

In late-Ming narrative texts, dragons are not only depicted as essentially human, but also as markers of human desires and faults. These portrayals vacillate between admiration for the dragons' power and otherworldliness, and condemnation of their greed and cruelty.⁶⁷ Rather than representing forces of *evil*, dragons are seen as powerful yet neutral creatures; as foes, they are often depicted as mischievous tricksters who disturb the natural order by succumbing to desire. Allegorically, the subjugation of the dragon echoes the Buddhist and Daoist challenge to harness the mind and curb mental weakness (*fulong* 伏龍).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Feng Dajian 冯大建, "Mingdai shenmo ticaixiaoshuo zhong longshen xingxiang de chuanbo yu dingxing" 明代神魔题材小说中龙神形象的传播与定型 (*Wenxue yu wenhua*, no. 3, 2012), pp. 26-32.

⁶⁸ This idea was explored by commentators of the *Journey to the West*; see Plaks, *Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 230, n. 136. Interestingly, Plaks also notes that in *Jin Ping Mei*, Ximen Qing is referred to as a "dragon" (and Pan Jinlian as "tiger"), evoking the image of a miniature "emperor." This could also be a symbolic association of Ximen Qing with the notion of the unfettered, greedy, lustful, demonic dragon.

Xu Xun's vanquishing of this dragon not only marks the zenith of his role as a benefactor of the common people, but also serves as a spiritual rite of passage, by which Xu Xun proves his mettle as a Daoist saint. At the end of chapter 14 of *The Iron Tree*, after finally catching the dragon, Xu Xun orders his disciple Shi Ce not to slay it, but instead to use its body as a deterrent for other dragons and water demons. Jiangxi is a floating land, Xu says, under which there are dragon caves; this land is thus always in danger of being invaded by other dragons. Hence, he erects an iron pillar in a well on the south side of Yuzhang, on which he chains the dragon, with an incantation (or exorcistic curse, *zhu* 祝):

“If the iron tree blooms, and this demon will revive, I shall return.
If the iron tree follows the right path, this demon will be subdued forever.
Water demons are now rid from this site, the towns and villages need not worry.”

This curse is recorded almost verbatim in most hagiographies of Xu Xun, from Bai Yuchan's “Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan” to Xie Shichen's album *Zhenxian shiji*. In *The Iron Tree*, the text goes on to quote a poem (*shi* 詩) by Wu Quanjie 吳全節 of the Yuan and a record (*ji* 記) that Xu leaves behind, which reads:

“The iron tree suppresses/controls the streams, in ten thousand years it will never rest.
(If/when) the world is in chaos, this place will have nothing to worry about.
(If/when) a drought pervades the land, this place will receive ample (rain).”

The chapter concludes with a series of other charms and demon-suppressing talismans that Xu Xun leaves behind: he throws an iron talisman (*fu* 符) into Poyang Lake, places an iron cap on Luling yuan Pond 廬陵元潭 (where one could still find his sword – according to the text), and erects a “pacifying office” on the top of Mount Tiaoyao 峇嶢山.

Why use an iron pole to subdue the Dragon of Poyang Lake and guard against future demonic foes? The Xu Xun lore follows a preexisting motif of subduing a water-demon (or harmful water deity) with metal instruments, from talismans to mountains, in accordance with

the five phases: metal triumphs over water. This notion is derived from a longstanding popular practice of using iron rods or pillars to control the underworld and “fixating” the forces of water.⁶⁹ Considering that Xu Xun himself as a reincarnation of Venus (*jinxing* 金星, or Metal Star) represents the metal phase, he is the ideal instrument to suppress watery demons. This final act of demonic subjugation is therefore closely tied to Xu Xun’s early role as a water deity and highlights his importance as exorcist / protector of the people. Xu Xun’s pursuit and eventual subjugation of the Sinful Dragon of Poyang Lake echoes Xu Xun’s early role as water deity, whose main mission is to regulate waterways and protect against droughts and floods. It also symbolizes competing cults, as well as the geography and forces of nature in general which man – and human celestial bureaucracy – come to subjugate and control.

The dragon’s subjugation under the iron tree somewhat echoes the role of Leifeng Pagoda in the story cycle of Lady White Snake. In Feng Menglong’s story, “Madame White Eternally Subjugated Under the Thunder Peak Pagoda,” included in *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言, the monk who consigned the demons to the pagoda recites:

“When the West Lake is drained of its water
And rivers and ponds are dried up,
When Thunder Peak Pagoda crumbles,
The White Snake shall again roam the earth.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Andersen, *The Demon Chained Under Turtle Mountain*, pp. 72-73. Another relating practice is placing large “iron oxen” (*tieniu* 鐵牛) on river banks, overlooking the water, as a way to regulate the rivers. Andersen quotes the local gazetteer *Xuyi xianzhi gao* 盱眙縣誌稿, stating that “water dragons fear iron, so that one may therefore suppress them by means of this [material].” See Andersen, p. 44.

⁷⁰ H. C. Chang, *Chinese Literature: Popular Fiction and Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), p. 260. *Jingshi tongyan* was published in 1624, twenty years after the publication of Deng’s trilogy.

The story also brings to mind the legend of Yu suppressing the god of the Huai and Guo rivers, Wuzhiqi 無支祁, by chaining him to the base of Turtle Mountain 龜山.⁷¹ According to this legend, the water fiend Wuzhiqi was imprisoned under a mountain by the legendary King Yu as well as by Guanyin.⁷² The suppression of Sun Wukong under the Five Elements Mountain in *Journey to the West* of course also springs to mind.⁷³

All these cases share an anxiety about demonic disturbances of human society whose solution lies in gaining more control over the geographic landscape, whether by physically reshaping it (moving mountains, capping ponds, erecting temples) or magically subjugating it (with charms, talismans, curses, and incantations). Moreover, these tales share an anxiety about the unpredictability and uncontrollability of water, the solution to which must be a permanent, tangible, colossal human construction. With its Iron Tree and protective talismans, Poyang Lake is thus transformed from an “aberrant site” (*guaiji* 怪跡), a place gripped by the supernatural, into “an ancient site and surviving trace” (*guji yizong* 古籍遺蹤), a place of heritage and shared cultural memory.

⁷¹ This legend is recorded in the *Taiping Guangji*, among other sources. See Andersen, pp. 16-21.

⁷² Anthony C. Yu, “Introduction” to *Journey to the West*, p. 9.

⁷³ Huang Zhigang examines the suppression of Pilgrim Sun 孫行者 by Guanyin in the *Tang sanzang xitian qujing* 唐三藏西天取經; see Huang, *Zhongguo shuishen*, pp. 177-178.



Figure 10: Xu Xun and his disciples erect the Iron Tree, *The Iron Tree*

3.5. Chronicles of Place

Locus played an increasingly cardinal role in the Xu Xun lore from Song to Ming; with every new textual and pictorial depiction of Xu’s life story, the places where it took place accrued further meaning.⁷⁴ “If a sacred site is to *stay* and persist,” Bingenheimer notes, “it needs the constant retelling of its religious meanings.”⁷⁵ Somewhat paradoxically, as the Xu Xun lore expanded beyond the bounds of the Nanchang region, the textual depiction of Xu did not neglect the local sites associated with his legend to accommodate transregional audiences, but on the

⁷⁴ Regarding the layering effect of places of cultural significance and pilgrimage sites, see James Robson, *Power of Place: the religious landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue) in medieval China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), especially chapters 1-2.

⁷⁵ Marcus Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin: Mount Putuo and its Gazetteers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 104.

contrary, paid even greater attention to these sites. The setting for Xu Xun's exploits was depicted succinctly in his earliest hagiographies, like the *Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao* and the *Eighty-Five Transformations*, that only mention these places in passing. Song and Yuan hagiographies of Xu (like the works of Bai Yuchan, Zhao Daoyi, and the *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu* version that is based on them) pay more attention to specific sites where Xu Xun lived, traveled, practiced, performed miracles, and ascended to heaven. The commentaries that accompanied these texts when they were incorporated into the Daoist canon in the Ming further expound on these sites, detailing their precise locations, their different names, and their current scope of operation. For instance, the commentary to Bai Yuchan's hagiography in the Daoist canon describes over forty locations associated with Xu Xun. Pictorial hagiographies like the *Xutaishi* (in the Daoist canon) and the mid-Ming (private) album *Zhenxian shiji* dedicate such a great portion of their texts to the location and condition of these sacred sites that they can virtually be read as illustrated, hagiographic travel guides. Lastly, perhaps the most long-lasting impact of the Xu Xun lore on the geo-cultural *imaginaire* of Jiangxi are the numerous place-names that originated in his legendary life story, from the Hiding Dragon Bridge (*fulong qiao* 伏龍橋) to the Brown Ox Islet (*huangniu zhou* 黃牛洲). In this sense, the Xu Xun legend redrew the chorographical or geo-cultural map of the Nanchang region.

What informed Deng Zhimo's treatment of these famous sites in *The Iron Tree*? As a local of the region that gave birth to the Xu Xun lore, Deng Zhimo was probably well versed in local legends and oral traditions. Li Fengmao suggested that Deng Zhimo drew from his personal knowledge of Xishan scenery and local folklore to enhance the sense of realism in his work.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 130.

His personal experiences as a visitor-cum-worshiper at the temples and famous sites associated with Xu Xun must have colored his writing on these places. Furthermore, in his professional network in Fujian and as part of his work as collator-editor, Deng had access to a wide array of sources. He might have been familiar with descriptions of (and allusions to) Xu Xun-related local sites and landmarks in gazetteers, *biji*, travel guides, and compendia on famous sites (*mingsheng* 名勝). Notable literati visited and wrote about Xu Xun temples, from Wang Anshi 王安石 in the Song to Cao Xuequan 曹學佺 during the Ming.⁷⁷ The *Ming yitong zhi* 明一統志 describes over twenty sites (temples and landmarks) associated with the Xu lore and worship.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on locations associated with Xu Xun did not translate into *descriptive* narrative before late Ming; most texts do not go beyond listing brief details about the names and locations of these sites.⁷⁸ The narrative fabric of Xu Xun's numerous hagiographies is characterized by listing rather than narrating, adopting a bird's-eye view that creates a notable distance between the text and the reader. In *The Iron Tree*, Deng Zhimo takes a markedly different approach to locale, devoting an unprecedented attention to descriptions of the background setting, particularly the natural landscape which Xu Xun travels through. Notwithstanding Deng's elaboration on these famous sites, it is important to note that a significant portion of his descriptions are not place-specific. That is, instead of describing a real geographical landscape that left an impression on Deng personally, his descriptions sometimes

⁷⁷ See Wang Anshi, Xu Jingyang ci 許旌陽祠記, included in the Xin Nanchang fuzhi (1588), and Cao Xuequan 曹學佺, *Shuzhong guangji* 蜀中廣記, juan 73, section 3, "Shenxian ji" 神仙記 (Accessed through Erudition database).

⁷⁸ Regarding listings and depictions of numinous sites in gazetteers, see Bingenheimer, pp. 95-96. He notes that "gazetteers divide the labor of landscape description between the *visual*, depicted in maps and images, the *factual*, presented in lists of topological-historical glosses, and the *poetical*, found in the sections on poetry. The bookkeeping mode of the inventory aims to construct the place in encyclopedic enumeration. The poetic mode, on the other hand, breathes life into the names by presenting them in the evocative, poetic language that previous visitors had used to describe the site."

rely heavily on literary and poetic clichés concerning heavenly grottos and immortals' roaming. Nevertheless, from the reader's perspective, not only does the text come closer than ever before to a portrayal of Xu's life as a lived experience, but it provides an almost cinematic depiction of famous episodes.

This cinematic depiction sets *The Iron Tree* apart from the hagiographic tradition that served as its source material. Its new emphasis on the visuality of setting and characters goes hand in hand with a new kind of dramatization of episodes in the life of Xu Xun. In other words, the narrative does more than list Xu Xun's miracles or triumphs over demonic dragons; in dramatizing the life of Xu, *The Iron Tree* turns readers into spectators.⁷⁹ Not only are we invited to view the landscapes and physical appearances of protagonists, but we are also granted entry into their minds and hearts: for the first time, we can *visualize* the Sinful Dragon of Poyang Lake and hear his thoughts! This descriptive narration strategy minimizes the distance between reader and text; it brings the world – even if an idealized vision of the world – into the narrative.

It is not just the world that *Tale of the Iron Tree* brings into the story, but the narrator as well. Since the role of the narrator and the development of the “storyteller voice” in late-imperial Chinese literature has been extensively examined by scholars in recent decades, I do not presume to offer any groundbreaking insights on that account.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the recurring retelling of Xu Xun's life story offers an interesting opportunity to compare the role of the narrator in what scholars often regard as “literary” and “non-literary” works. In Tang and Song hagiographies of

⁷⁹ Regarding visuality in origin narratives and their relationship with religious drama, see discussion in Chapter 1.

⁸⁰ Notable works include Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Robert E. Hegel, *The Novel in Seventeenth Century China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); C.T. Hsia, *Classic Chinese novel: a critical introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Wilt L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Richard G. Irwin, *Evolution of a Chinese Novel: Shuihu chuan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

Xu in the Daoist canon, the narrator moves in the shadows, but his voice is not entirely absent. The first extant full-length hagiography of Xu, the *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao*, is dotted with rhetorical questions, exclamations of wonder, anticipation, and praise. There is a sense of familiarity in the author's tendency to refer to Xu Xun sometimes as "my lord Xu" (我許君).⁸¹ The poems of the *Eighty-Five Transformations* also offer a window onto the narrator's position vis-à-vis the well-known life story of Xu. Certain time markers and mediating expressions also add a sense of immediacy to Xu's canonical hagiographies. However, they still lack meaningful internal observation and judgment. To some extent, Bai Yuchan's work served as a stepping stone for *Tale of the Iron Tree*, where the narrator's pervading presence in the text reshapes the life story of Xu Xun. The dramatic shift in language, from the simple classical formulas characterizing earlier texts toward "plain language" Chinese, was likewise instrumental in creating a new voice of an omnipresent narrator in late-Ming narrative texts.⁸²

3.6. Practice: Charms, Spells, and Curses – Oh My!

The Iron Tree incorporates an unprecedented number of non-biographical and non-narrative materials that were not previously included in Xu Xun's life story. These include memorials (*zou* 奏), imperial edicts and proclamations (*xuanzhao* 宣詔), admonitions (*xun* 訓), charms and talismans (*fu* 符, *zhen* 鎮), spells (*zhou* 咒), curses (*zhu* 祝), prophecies (*chen* 讖), and ritual

⁸¹ The other common term is the Perfected Lord Xu 許真君.

⁸² In this sense, the pronounced presence of the narrator in both pre-Ming hagiographies of Xu Xun and *Tale of the Iron Tree* marks them as "discourse" rather than "narrative" according to Genette. See Gérard Genette, "Boundaries of Narrative" (*New Literary History* 8, no. 1, Autumn 1976), pp. 9-11.

instructions (*fa* 法), poems by famous men-of-letters, philosophical discussions on the nature of virtue and purpose of self-cultivation, and instructions for inner alchemy (*xiulian xiandan fa* 修煉仙丹法). Most of these additions are borrowed from other texts, especially from the Daoist canon. The breadth of the materials Deng weaved into the narrative is credited to his broad learning and unique access to texts of all kinds due to his work as editor-collator-writer in the Cuiqing tang publishing house. The inclusion of these materials is critical; not only are these materials used within the framework of the narrative to support its underlying logic, but they also transform the reading experience of this narrative text as a whole.

In chapter 2, the heavenly envoy the Filial Lord (*xiaoti wang* 孝悌王) descends to the human world to bestow divine knowledge upon the virtuous Langong of Qufu, so that eventually it reaches Xu Xun. While this encounter is mentioned in most pre-Ming hagiographies of Xu Xun, *The Iron Tree* is the first to describe the content of this teaching. According to the Filial Lord, the cosmos is ruled by filiality, or *xiao* 孝; filial piety is the root of all creation: reaching heaven, it illuminates the sun and moon; reaching earth, it gives life to the myriad things; reaching the people, it generates successful rulership. He goes on to demonstrate the importance of filiality by citing the ancient sage kings. This summary of the teaching of the Filial Dao concludes with a poem which reads: “Filial piety is the origin of human conduct, accomplishment lies in rectifying name and order – thus can one ascend to immortality.” In this scene, Deng integrates excerpts from the *Taishang ganying bian* 太上感應編 and Langong’s hagiography in the *Taiping guangji*.⁸³

⁸³太上感應編, *juan 2*, 正統道藏, in Erudition database, p. 90; and *Taiping Guangji*, *juan 15*, p. 492.

The Filial Lord furthermore transmits to Langong “immortal’s formulas” (*xian jia miaojue* 仙家妙訣), precious mirror and golden cinnabar (*jindan baojian* 金丹寶鑒), copper talisman and iron scrolls (*tongfu tiejuan* 銅符鐵券), Upper clarity spirit manuscript (*bing shangqing lingcao* 並上清靈草), and the method of “flying steps for vanquishing demons” (*feibu zhanxie zhi fa* 飛步斬邪之法).⁸⁴ After the Filial Lord flies back to heaven, Langong puts this knowledge into use as part of his practice of inner alchemy. Here Deng Zhimo gives us another glimpse into the teaching and practice of the Filial Dao. This part is almost identical to a section from a Daoist canon text bearing the same title, *Tongfu tiejuan* 銅符鐵券 (identical parts are highlighted):⁸⁵

<i>The Iron Tree</i>	<i>Tongfu tiejuan</i>
黑鉛天之精，白金地之髓	黑鉛天之精，白金地之液
黑隱水中陽，白有火之無炁	黑隱水中揚，白有火之氣
黑白往來蟠，陰陽歸正位	黑白往來翻，拘來歸正位
二物俱含性，丹經號同類	二物性合情，丹經居同類
黑以白為天，白以黑為地	黑以白為夫，陰以陽為配
陰陽混沌時，朵朵金蓮翠	陰陽混沌時，朵朵金花翠
寶月滿丹田，霞光照靈慧	寶月滿丹田，猛烹火煨極
休閉通天竅，莫泄混元氣	休閉通天竅，令其呼與吸
精奇口訣功，火候文武意	翻騰舉目間，烏龜自隱匿
凡中養聖孫，萬般只此貴	精奇口訣功，火候在消息
-----	壺中養聖孫，萬般只此貴
一日生一男，男男各有配。	一日生一男，男男各居室。

⁸⁴ The “flying steps” method seems to be closely tied to the Xu Xun lore; the only source that I have found on this method outside of Xu’s hagiographic tradition is the anonymous Song-dynasty Jingming Daoist text *Jingming dongshen shangpin jing* 淨明洞神上品經. The scriptures Xu receives from Chenmu are titled *Jindan baojing* 金丹寶經 and *Tongfu tiejuan* 銅符鐵券. Texts carrying these titles are included in the Daozang and profess to be the very scriptures that Xu received (see discussion below).

⁸⁵ See *Tongfu tiejuan* 銅符鐵券 in the Daoist canon CT 951, as well as in the *Daozang tiyao* 道藏輯要 and the *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書. This paragraph appears in chapter 5 of the “Chihanwen” 池函文, which is part of the “secret formula of the earth primer of the nine ponds” 地元九池秘訣.

In the following chapter, when Langong transmits the divine methods to Chenmu, we get another glimpse into this teaching; however, here the narrative strays farther from the canonical text (identical or near-identical parts highlighted):

訣曰：

真仙試把道法傳，**闡揚正教汞與鉛。**
鉛飛雪浪汞流液， 朵朵金花起紫煙。
紫煙飛上凌霄殿， 連連結結冰花片。
日月拋光朗大千，**異風常使金花現。**
抽出天魂奪日霞， 水晶宮裡是吾家。
吾家不是非凡境，夜餐露液晝日華。
汞死為鉛鉛化土，白雲鼎氣丹之祖。
懷盡天魂地魄中， 玄元稱此為丹母。
仙機細細口傳君，**巧奪乾坤日月真。**
道法千門及萬戶。 千門萬戶獨斯尊。
早朝上帝拋金璽， 晚捧玉皇丹詔旨。
朝游碧落暮蒼梧，晚走扶桑西閭圃。
汞是元神鉛是形，形神相得合為真。
真神相遇真形後，善果周完睹太清。

大道流行滿上天爾曹仙子樂無邊龍漢延康
三劫盡玄宮大展令敷宣：東華昇舉西華主，
太乙元君諶母傳，親授皇人二八機，至玄
至妙至幽微，可令塵寰流玉液，早將仙子
赴瑤池，珠臺降下銅符券，勅下元君諶母
知，弘道真人弘道仙，**闡揚正教汞和鉛，**
鉛飛雪浪流珠滾， 覆下依然真土眠，土稟
天符生碧葉，**躲躲金花起紫煙，** 紫煙飛
上凌霄殿，**連連續續冰花片，** 日月拋光朗
大千，**異風吹起金花現，** 不得流珠不計
鉛，生靈聚景防危戰，日魂將近月神圓，
赫赫日魂霞九萬，四方籠罩合真鉛，鉛含
五彩何人見，煉鉛無計覓真傳，不得庚金
華不現，採得辛金一味真，再入灰池取次
鍊，上下浮沈顛倒問，壬花莫令烏雲亂，
抽出天魂奪日霞， 水晶宮裏是吾家，返得
流金回聖體，何勞蹉跎遍天涯，**汞死為鉛**
鉛化土， 白金鼎器丹之祖，**懷盡天魂地魄**
中， 玄元稱此為丹母，汞積九九返成砂，
龍出東方西就虎，晉世明王孝道存，金筋
玉骨許之孫，咒符勅水降魔魅，明功暗德
濟蒼生，可將鐵券天王旨，銅符細細口傳
君，玉清願見功勛士，光眉大展笑顏欣，
巨闕彌封碧玉匣，明珠照世破幽城，速令
名山拿玉兔燦日擒歸再莫論日魂消盡千山
雪奚慮區區遍體陰但烹黍米扶神氣看看天
時徧五陵惡龍噴出三江水毒氣零零滿世塵
若不勅汝扶危難骨城血海痛傷心急以鼎池
爐裏煉**巧奪乾坤日月精，** 道法千門及萬
戶，**千門萬戶獨斯尊，** 十二神符九白雪，
三回五轉號天青，一粒一服三期後，周身
九竅自光明，白雪入口身生羽神符吞下足
生雲漸覺三陽開泰日浮生腐草盡逢春功高
行備膺天祿拔宅昇騰及滿門，**早朝上帝拋**

	<p>金璽， 玉詔天書五岳迎閑觀碧落空歌韻時 倚空青始氣森一自五雲騰勝日天香滿室古 今聞九六天機親囑付珍藏寶秘莫爲輕至人 授受吳王李非之雷火即時臨金丹遞運玄元 始五炁分張一炁成不比嚙呼三一法不是回 頭口內津不是閨丹御女術不是砒黃丹礦成 鉛是元神銀是形形神相得合爲真元神相遇 真形後果用元神觀太清。</p>
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We find another example in chapter 5. The first conversation between Xu Xun and his master-cum-disciple Wu Meng is based on a dialog between Lu Dongbin and Zhongli Quan in the *Zhong-Lu zhuan dao ji* 鐘呂傳道集. Wu Meng, in the role of the master (quoting Zhongli Quan), explains that life—the *qi* of the fetus—is conceived by the conjoining of the *yin* and *yang* of its parents. This balanced childhood *qi* lasts until around age fifteen, when a man begins to lose his *yang* and his *qi* gradually begins to dissipate, unless he knows how to cultivate himself (*xiuyang* 修養). If a man does not cultivate himself, he will eventually lose all his *yang* and upon death becomes a ghost. An immortal is pure *yang*, whereas a ghost is pure *yin*. Wu Meng goes on to list the five levels of attaining *xian*-hood: ghost immortal (鬼仙), human immortal (人仙), earth immortal (地仙), god immortal (神仙), and heavenly immortal (天仙).⁸⁶ Wu Meng also transmits to Xu the *White Cloud Charm Book* (*baiyun fushu* 白雲符書), though the text does not divulge anything about the content of this mysterious work.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Some of this conversation about the five kinds of immortals also appears in chapter 58 of *Journey to the West*, when Sun Wukong and his impostor travel to the Western Paradise to seek help from the Buddha. Here, it is the Buddha Śākyamuni who delivers this explanation to Gunayin in the presence of a large congregation.

⁸⁷ The only reference to the *White Cloud Charm Book* outside the Xu Xun story-cycle that I found is the lore of Lord Xiao 蕭公, a Jiangxi immortal/deity.

The abovementioned conversation concludes with a twenty-two line inner alchemical poem titled “Song of Immortal Grotto” (*Dongxian ge* 洞仙歌). This poem might be an original composition of Deng Zhimo and a new addition to the Xu Xun lore. Although this poem uses the esoteric terminology of inner alchemy, it does not contain any actual directions for ritual, nor does it read like a genuine guide for the practice of inner alchemy. It might be regarded as another example of a late-Ming writer invoking inner alchemy to attach importance to the hagiography of a cultural icon, as I noted in Chapter 1.

What are we then to make of all this textual hybridity? What were Deng Zhimo’s assumptions about his readers and their expectations of the text? To what extent were they familiar with the sources from which Deng drew these quotes? And moreover, did his readers possess the vocabulary–linguistic and conceptual–to understand these materials? As consumers of late-Ming commercially-published works, Deng’s readers were probably accustomed to this type of textual hybridity that often brought partial, jumbled, and de-contextualized quotes and allusions into the realm of narrative writing. The great majority of Deng’s readership probably did not have access to the canonical and sectarian sources that he drew upon, though they might have been versed, to some extent, in the Daoist terminology he used. Even if the majority of Deng’s readers have never read doctrinal works on inner-alchemy, the vocabulary associated with this practice have by then become an inseparable part of the late-Ming cultural repertoire. In this sense, *The Iron Tree* not only offered access to specialized knowledge previously unavailable to the general reader, but also supplied a narrative-based context and an approachable conceptual framework for its consumption.

About twenty years after the publication of *The Iron Tree*, the famous author-editor Feng Menglong adapted Deng Zhimo's work into the format of a short story (*huaben* 話本), which he published twice under slightly different titles.⁸⁸ While Feng Menglong followed Deng Zhimo's work very closely, maintaining the structure of the narrative and most of its original language, Feng made several changes that critically affected its reading experience. First, he eliminated chapter breaks and dropped Deng Zhimo's preface and his personal address to the readers that concludes *The Iron Tree*.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Feng Menglong erased most of Deng's poems and descriptive passages, and removed nearly all doctrinal or non-narrative materials.⁹⁰ By removing many of Deng's descriptive poems and paragraphs, Feng Menglong's version devoted far less attention to the natural setting and atmosphere, thus reinstating a distance between the reader and the narrative that Deng Zhimo's cinematic portrayals worked to eliminate in *The Iron Tree*. Feng shifted the focus away from theoretical questions concerning self-cultivation, focusing instead on action – the adventurous sequence of events that make up Xu Xun's life story. Feng transformed Deng's hagiographical origin narrative into an action-packed, entertaining tale, thus profoundly altering its reading experience.

⁸⁸ “The Iron Tree of Jingyang Temple Imprisons Demons” 旌陽宮鐵樹鎮妖 appeared in the *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 and the “The Tale of Lord Xu Vanquishing the Dragons in Jingyang Temple” 許真君旌陽宮斬蛟傳 in *Sanjiao ounian* 三教偶拈. The two stories are almost identical.

⁸⁹ See Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 126-127.

⁹⁰ Feng Menglong dropped most of the inner-alchemical poems and the discussions on the nature of filial piety, but kept the exorcistic curse and prophecy.

4. The Xu Xun Cult(s): from Local Lore to Daoist Patriarch

The kaleidoscopic Xu Xun was revered in late-imperial China as a miracle-worker, healer, exorcist, and Daoist patriarch, as well as a virtuous magistrate, a family-man, and a paragon of filial piety.⁹¹ From a local deified hero of the Nanchang area in Jiangxi, the legend of Xu Xun transformed into a transregional, cross-cultural lore, whose enduring popularity is indebted to both worship and writing. Through the centuries, concomitant with the proliferation of his cult center in Jiangxi and his growing popularity in the Jiangnan region, Xu Xun was appropriated by the Jingming and Lüshan Daoist sects. In a historical perspective, Xu Xun's multifaceted myth cycle not only reflects the ever-changing views and demands of his audience, but also the tensions between representation and worship that underlie any centuries-long reverence of a cultural icon. In this section, I introduce the Xu Xun lore by exploring the types of sources that shaped and propagated his reverence.

It is important to note that the plethora of textual, visual, and physical records relating to Xu Xun did not only shape premodern audiences' views of the immortal, but it is continuously shaping our views as well. One of the challenges we face when encountering a long and rich tradition such as the Xu Xun lore is our inevitable indebtedness to sources originating within his

⁹¹ The most notable works on the Xu Xun lore include Akizuki Kanei 秋月觀暎, *Chūgoku kinsei Dōkyō no keisei: Jōmyōdō no kisoteki kenkyū* 中國近世道教の形成: 淨明道の基礎的研究 (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1978), or in its Chinese translation *Zhongguo jinshi daojiao de xingcheng: Jingming dao de jichu yanjiu* 中國近世道教的形成: 淨明道の基礎研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005); Huang Xiaoshi 黃小石, *Jingming Dao yanjiu* 淨明道研究 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1999); Li Fengmao 李豐楙, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian: Deng Zhimo daojiao xiaoshuo yanjiu* 許遜與薩守堅: 鄧志謨道教小說研究 (Taipei: guojiao tushuguan chubanshe, 1997); Liu Cunren 柳存仁, "Xu Xun yu Langong" 許遜與蘭公 (*Shijie zongjiao yanjiu*, vol. 3, 1985), pp. 40-59; K. M. Schipper "Taoist Ritual and Local Cults of the T'ang Dynasty," in Michel Strickmann ed., *Tantric and Taoist Studies* (no. 3, 1985); Xu Wei 許蔚, "Jingming Dao zushi tuxiang yanjiu: yi 'Xutaishi zhenjun tuzhuan' wei zhongxin" 淨明道祖師圖像研究 —以《許太史真君圖傳》為中心 (*Hanxue yanjiu*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2011), pp. 119-152, and his review article "Bai nian lai Xu Xun ji Jingming Dao yanjiu shuping" 百年來許遜及淨明道研究述評 (*Yanjiu zongshu*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2011), pp. 11-22; Zhang Zehong 張澤洪 "Xu Xun yu Wu Meng" 許遜與吳猛 (*Shijie zongjiao yanjiu*, vol. 1, 1990), pp. 65-73.

cult, particularly his numerous hagiographies. Moreover, determining which sources are internal or external to the tradition—if we would to attempt such a distinction—poses a conundrum. While trying helplessly not to get entangled in the self-attested truths of the tradition’s own propaganda, we always run the risk of obscuring the realities we attempt to describe. These realities, as all human experience, are far more complicated, fragmented, and messy than our scholarly-constructed histories.⁹² Thus, constructing the history of a cult, or any other kind of centuries-old tradition, is as much a work of creative selectiveness as it is detective work. Although in the course of this chapter I will allude to “the cult of Xu Xun,” it is important to stress that the Xu Xun lore never existed as a unified construct. Rather, it would be more productive to think about it as a system of relationships between stories, places, rituals, images, and people.

While the numerous textual portrayals of Xu Xun place him at a very specific point in time and space, there is no historical evidence outside his hagiographical tradition to corroborate the basic details of his biography.⁹³ Nevertheless, the Xu Xun lore is based on a general assumption that he was a real person, a historical figure (not unlike many other late-imperial Chinese cultural icons), a native of Yuzhang County 豫章縣 in Jiangxi who lived during the Jin Dynasty (265-420) and served as magistrate of Jingyang 旌陽, arguably in Sichuan.⁹⁴ This

⁹² See Robert F. Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)” (*History of Religions*, vol. 42, no. 4, May 2003), pp. 287-319.

⁹³ See discussion in Akizuki Kanei, *Zhongguo jin shi dao jiao de xing cheng*, pp. 27-28. There are also some inconsistencies in the record of Xu Xun’s supposedly-historical life, sometimes even within the same source; for instance, one excerpt from the *Taiping Guangji* places Xu Xun in Eastern Jin (*juan* 14) whereas another places him in the end of Western Jin (*juan* 231). Regarding the lack of historical data to corroborate Xu Xun existence and the roots of his worship in the Yuzhang area, see Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 14-20. By contrast, Huang Xiaoshi claims that Jin and Tang-era sources ascertain that Xu Xun was a real person. See Huang, *Jingming Dao yanjiu*, pp. 1-4.

⁹⁴ Regarding the locations of Yuzhang, Jingyang, and other Xu Xun-associated locations, see Zhang Zehong, “Xu Xun yu Wu Meng,” pp. 65-73.

assumption is intimately tied to the earliest origins of Xu reverence which seems to have originated in the Yuzhang area, Jiangxi Province, during the Six Dynasties period.⁹⁵ The area surrounding Xishan 西山 (also known as Xiaoyao shan 逍遥山) became the center of Xu Xun reverence. Located about fifteen kilometers northwest of Nanchang 南昌 in Jiangxi Province, near Poyang Lake, Xishan is identified in Daoist lore as home to the twelfth of the thirty-six minor grotto-heavens (*dongtian* 洞天) and the thirty-eight node in the web of the seventy-two blissful-lands (*fudi* 福地).⁹⁶

At its earliest stages, Xu Xun worship was a personal cult, focusing on the figure of the saint, and rooted in local beliefs in protective water deities. Xu's lore is closely tied to the myth-cycles of Li Bing 李冰, Xiaogong 肖公, and Angong 宴公, with whom he shares certain traits and storylines. The Xu Xun cult fully incorporated his role as a water deity by the Song dynasty; between his numerous battles with river serpents and lake dragons, Xu Xun is also depicted performing miracles to ease droughts and cure water-borne epidemics.⁹⁷ Local gazetteers trace the history of the Xu cult and its main temple to the shrines built soon after the ascension of the

⁹⁵ Akizuki Kanei divided the history of the Xu Xun cult into four main stages of developments; see *Chūgoku kinsei Dōkyō no keisei*, pp. 248-249. See also discussion of the development of Xu's cult in Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 14-17. This local link still serves as the geographical locus of Xu Xun's myth and cult today. In 2002, the Chinese Daoist Association, in cooperation with Nanchang municipality, the Jiangxi Daoist Association, and Xishan Wanshou gong organized a conference on Jingming Daoism and Xu Xun's legacy in Nanchang. The conference title was “中国道教净明道国际文化研讨会暨道教文化笔会.” Most of the papers later appeared in the volume “2002 年中国道教净明道文化研讨会论集” (南昌科技师范学院政史系, 中共江西省委党校, 江西行政学院).

⁹⁶ See Sha Mingshou 沙铭寿, *Dongtian fudi: Daojiao gonguan shengjing* 洞天福地: 道教宫观胜境 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 6, 10.

⁹⁷ See *Jiangxi minsu wenhua xulun* 江西民俗文化叙论 (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1995), pp. 21-23; Huang Zhigang, *Zhongguo de shuishen*, pp. 43-75; Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 96. Song texts also reveal connections between Xu Xun lore and worship of Wenchang/Zitong; see Terry Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 63-65.

(supposedly) historical Xu Xun.⁹⁸ This local, personal cult is said to have declined during the Sui-Tang transition, but was revitalized in the eighth century by Hu Huichao, who shifted its focus to Filial Daoism (*xiaodao* 孝道).⁹⁹ Thus, this period marks the earliest roots of Xu Xun's association with the Jingming Daoist sect (otherwise known as the Filial Dao sect), which gradually incorporated his lore and adopted him as patriarch. Similarly to other local adepts and deities who centered on a single figure and his/her miraculous skills, once they were incorporated into the Daoist narratives (or pantheon), individual adepts were mentioned as proof of the efficacy of the practices, and always placed within a larger context, as Gil Raz argues.¹⁰⁰ Raz furthermore views the development of Daoism as an organic process in which the prestige of individual practitioners transformed them from masters of local lineages of practice into regional foci of reverence. In the course of this process, individual practitioners were subsumed within increasingly formulaic depictions. Paradoxically, this eventually led to a diminishing of the individual's personality, lost within the grand narratives of the Daoist pantheon. Broadly speaking, the history of the Xu Xun lore attests to this transition from personal cultic reverence—that focuses on his figure and skills—toward a wider use of Xu as a symbol and vehicle for Daoist teachings and practices.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ The *Jiangxi tongzhi* 江西通志 includes over a dozen entries from the Ming alone that describe the local origins of the Xu cult; for a full list of entries, see the annotated bibliography in appendix 2.2.

⁹⁹ Hu Huichao is attributed with writing the lost Tang Dynasty text *Hagiographies of the Twelve Perfected* (*shi'er zhenjun zhuan* 十二真君传). Some write his name as 胡惠超.

¹⁰⁰ Gil Raz, *The emergence of Daoism: creation of tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 90.

¹⁰¹ It is important to note that Xu Xun's personal local cultic reverence continued to exist side by side with his cooption by Daoism in general and his reverence as a patriarch of the Jingming sect in particular. Moreover, his legend was never flattened out nor became generic (as other local saints did), but maintained key elements of his early personal cultic reverence into modern times.

Essentially, Xu Xun's cooption as the patriarch of the Jingming Daoist sect is more a product of historical circumstances than intrinsically related to Xu Xun. Some of the earliest sources on Jingming Daoism in the Daoist canon, supposedly dating to the late Tang, do not mention Xu Xun at all. Since the birthplace of Jingming Daoism is the Xishan area in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, which, since the Six Dynasties period, has also been the center of the Xu Xun cult, it is most likely that geographic overlap merged the two traditions; Xu Xun's existing cult seems to have been incorporated into the emerging Jingming sect.¹⁰² The geographical origins of the Jingming Dao in the Xishan area also shed light on its early ties to inner alchemy. The Tang alchemist-poet Shi Jianwu 施肩吾 (fl. 820-835) and his preceptors Zhongli Quan and Lu Dongbin became a part of the Xishan lore, particularly in the *Xishan qun xian hui zhen ji* 西山群仙會真記, the third most important text in the Zhong-Lu corpus.¹⁰³

Xu's association with the Jingming Dao could explain why filial piety became one of Xu Xun's main attributes in late-imperial China despite a notable lack of records of filial action in his early hagiographies. In fact, only a couple of brief anecdotes from the Tang show Xu Xun demonstrating his filial piety. The *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 (984) quotes the lost text *Xu Xun biezhuàn* 許遜別傳 which describes how Xu Xun supported his family after his father died, despite the harsh treatment he suffered from his mother and sister-in-law.¹⁰⁴ In another excerpt,

¹⁰² See Guo Wu 郭武, *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu yanjiu: yi Song, Yuan shehui wei beijing de kaocha* 淨明忠孝全書研究：以宋元社會為背景的考察 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005).

¹⁰³ The *Xishan qun xian hui zhen ji* 西山群仙會真記, is attributed to Shi Jianwu; see Siku quanshu, section 子, no. 258, pp. 137-167. See also Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, *The Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge 2008), pp. 1112-1113.

¹⁰⁴ *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽, *juan* 424, 人事部 65, p. 2604 (accessed through Erudition database). See also Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 21-23.

the *Taiping Yulan* quotes the *Youming lu* 幽明錄 describing an encounter between Xu Xun and the ghost of his deceased father, whom he never knew. His father appealed to Xu Xun's filial duty (*xiaoti* 孝悌) to demand his help in securing a proper burial.¹⁰⁵ However, later hagiographies no longer mention his relationship with his parents or siblings, nor do we witness Xu's filial devotion through action. The only trace of his early portrayals as a devoted son remains his enduring designation as a paragon of filial piety, by name alone. It is only in late Ming, with the narrative text *The Iron Tree*, that we detect efforts to highlight and illustrate Xu Xun's filiality, as part of the narrative's larger mission to consolidate the different aspects of his reverence.

The transformation of Xu Xun reverence into a cult centering on Xu Xun temple-worship in Xishan was more the product of political, economic, and cultural changes in Chinese society at the time, particularly in Jiangxi.¹⁰⁶ This process can be traced back to the Tang that saw the appearance of the first full-length hagiographies of Xu Xun. This period also saw the first wave of imperial patronage of the cult, during Tang Xuanzong's reign (712-756), as Xu Xun came to be regarded as a guardian of the empire. Xu Xun reverence took up further political significance during the Song dynasty, when he was perceived as a protective deity of the empire in the face of Jurchen invasions.¹⁰⁷ This wave of popularity prompted the Emperor Song Zhenzong to change Xu Xun's main temple from Youwei guan 遊帷觀 to Yulong gong 玉隆觀. In the following

¹⁰⁵*Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽, *juan* 519, 宗親部 9, p. 3139 (accessed through Erudition database).

¹⁰⁶ Guo Wu, *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu yanjiu*, pp. 163-165.

¹⁰⁷ According to Zhang Yixi, in the context of the Jin invasions during the Song, Xu Xun worship acquired further soteriological significance, particularly through the work of He Zhengong 何真公. See Zhang Yixi 張藝曦, "Feisheng chushi de qidai – Ming zhong wan qi shiren yu longsha chen" 飛昇出世的期待——明中晚期士人與龍沙讖 (*Xin shixue*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2011), p. 9.

century, Emperor Huizong bestowed upon Xu Xun his first official title, Shengong miaoji zhenjun 神功妙濟真君, in 1112 and renamed Xu Xun's main temple Yulong wanshou gong 玉隆萬壽宮 in 1116.¹⁰⁸

The Song marks the zenith of Xu Xun's hagiographic writing: it was the most prolific period both in the sheer number of works produced and in their long-term impact on the Xu lore. Tales of Xu Xun's miraculous life, and particularly his iconic subjugation of the Dragon of Poyang Lake, seem to have taken root in the popular imagination far beyond his hometown in Jiangxi.¹⁰⁹ It was also during the Song Dynasty that Xu Xun has achieved the status of "banished immortal" (*zhexian* 謫仙), and came to be regarded as more than a mere mortal.¹¹⁰ The *Yongcheng jixian lu* 壩城集仙錄, a collection of biographies of female immortals by Du Guangting, describes Xu Xun as one who descended from the ranks of the immortals (從仙階之等降也).¹¹¹ This designation set the stage for the narrative structure of the late-Ming *The Iron Tree*, which portrays the circular trajectory of Xu's descent to the world and re-ascent to heaven.

¹⁰⁸ The imperial patronage of Xu and the promotion of his cult, concomitant with the destruction of illicit temples, should be understood within the larger context of the Song transformation of China's religious landscape as a result (among other factors) of the state's appropriation and suppression of local cults. See Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China: 1127-1276* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Robert P. Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, local religion, and models of divinity in Sung and modern China* (Berkeley: University of Columbia Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁹ For instance, Zhu Xi briefly described the Xu Xun lore and compared it to similar stories of demonic subjugations in a commentary to the *Chuci*. See Zhu Xi, *Chuci bianzheng* 楚辭辯證, "Tianwen" 天問, *juan 2*.

¹¹⁰ Li Fengmao's examined the concept of the "banished immortal" in relation to several cultural icons and celebrated literary works. He discussed Deng Zhimo's works in "Deng Zhimo Daojiao xiaohuo de zhexian jiegou – jianlun zhongguo chuantong xiaoshuo de shenhua jiegou" 鄧志謨道教小說的謫仙結構 - 兼論中國傳統小說的神話結構 (*Xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiu* 小說戲曲研究, no. 4, June, 1993), pp. 60-78.

¹¹¹ This section appears in a hagiography of Chenmu included in Du Guangting, *Yongcheng jixian lu* 壩城集仙錄 in the Daoist canon CT 783 (正統道藏, 洞神部, 譜籙類); see also Suzanne E. Cahill, *Divine Traces of the Daoist Sisterhood: "Records of the assembled transcendents of the fortified walled city"* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2006).

The connection between Xu lore and Jingming practices further intensified during the Song. The Southern Song liturgist Jin Yunzhong 金允中 (fl. circa 1224) not only saw the Filial Dao and Xu Xun worship as an integral part of the Lingbao liturgical tradition, but even regarded it as its crowning achievement.¹¹² In the thirteenth century, Liu Yu (1257-1308) reformulated the Jingming zhongxiao Dao 淨明忠孝道 teaching and solidified Xu Xun's position as patriarch of the sect.¹¹³ Liu Yu is also credited with establishing the Jingming Fa 淨明法, a derivative of Jingming Dao which Xu Xun is believed to have received from the female Daoist Chenmu and employed to vanquish demons and attain immortality. One of the most important early sources on Jingming Fa is the *Lingbao jingming xinxiu jiulao shenyin fumo bifa* 靈寶淨明新修九老神印伏魔秘法, compiled and edited by He Shouzheng 何守證.¹¹⁴ According to him, Xu Xun's disciples inherited this secret method and continued to propagate it for many years.¹¹⁵

Liu Yu shifted the focus from divine intervention to human action as a recipe for attainment. He argued that it is personal moral causality, or *baoying* 報應, that determines one's

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Liu Yu is credited, among other things, with annotating Xu Xun's hagiography included in the *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu*. This central scripture also crowns Liu Yu as the rightful successor of Xu Xun in the Jingming Dao cult lineage.

¹¹⁴ He Shouzheng 何守證, *Lingbao jingming xinxiu jiulao shenyin fumo bifa* 靈寶淨明新修九老神印伏魔秘法, in the Daoist Canon CT 562 (正統道藏, 洞玄部方法類).

¹¹⁵ He Shouzheng amended this text and added a preface in 1131. According to He, two years later during the eighth month, Xu appeared in Youwei, the site of his ascension where the Yulong wanshou gong, Xu Xun's main temple, was later erected. Hence they built an altar named Yizhen 翼真, where He Shouzheng supposedly received his students (越二年, 秋八月, 高明大使親歛臨於遊帷故地, 即今之江西玉隆萬壽宮也。於是肇建仙壇, 名曰翼真, 以延善知識). According to Boltz, He Shouzheng's preface "is followed by instruction on cultivating internal state of Jingming replicating the radiance of the sun and moon. Essential to this contemplative practice is a *Fumo shenyin* 伏魔神印 (Divine Seal for Suppressing Demons) and the microcosmic imagery of a *Jingming qijing* 淨明氣鏡 (Mirror of the Pure and Bright Life-Force)." See Boltz, "Jingming dao," p. 569.

life – not the will of the gods.¹¹⁶ This emphasis on human action should be understood within the larger intellectual context of Southern Song, when devout literati shifted the discussion of Xu Xun reverence from “immortals’ Dao” 仙道 to “human Dao” 人道.¹¹⁷ At the same time, however, Liu Yu also propagated an image of Xu as a spirit (*linghun* 靈魂) that attained immortality (*chengxian* 成仙), instead of a regular mortal (*routi* 肉體) who reached that level.¹¹⁸ These views not only informed Xu Xun’s hagiographic tradition in general, but also fueled the underlying tension in *The Iron Tree* between Xu Xun’s predestined fate as a descended immortal and his ongoing effort as a human being to attain immortality through moral conduct and Daoist self-cultivation.

During the turbulent years of the Liao and Jin dynasties, Xu Xun worship again reflected nationalistic tendencies by shifting its focus from filial Daoism to filial loyalty (*zhongxiao zhi Dao* 忠孝之道). Imperial recognition continued into the Yuan: in 1295, Emperor Yuan Chengzong granted Xu Xun the title Zhidao xuanying 至道玄應.¹¹⁹ Around this time, the textual tradition surrounding Xu Xun’s figure increasingly gravitated toward reifying Confucian ideals without erasing the local, miraculous, and exorcistic elements of his myth-cycle. Local gazetteers since the Song dynasty not only propagated Xu reverence and legitimized his temples, but have

¹¹⁶ This debate is linked to a longstanding epistemological problem in Daoism that became especially contested during the Song; see Akizuki Kanei, *Zhongguo jinshi daojiao de xingcheng*, pp. 188-191. Late-Ming works, such as *Tale of the Iron Tree*, revisit this debate from a different perspective, as will be discussed below.

¹¹⁷ Chen and Wang, “Song Ming difangzhi yu Nanchang diqu Xu Xun Xinyang de bianqian,” p. 60.

¹¹⁸ Guo Wu *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu yanjiu*, p. 299.

¹¹⁹ Judith M. Boltz, “Jingming dao,” in *A Survey of Taoist Literature: tenth to seventeenth centuries* (Berkeley: University of California, Center for Chinese Studies, 1987), p. 567. Imperial titles are useful in dating certain hagiographies; Akizuki Kanei relies on the appearance of these titles to distinguish between pre-Song and post-Song hagiographies of Xu Xun.

also played a key role in bridging Daoist ritual and popular worship of Xu Xun.¹²⁰ Furthermore, depictions of Xu Xun in local gazetteers have gradually transformed his image into an erudite god of fortune, in accordance with more orthodox, Confucian requirements, so that he could be added to the repertoire of official local sacrifices.¹²¹ In a stele inscription by Chen Wenzhu, recorded in a Wanli-era Nanchang local gazetteer, Chen reiterated that Xu Xun earned the popular admiration and worship of locals through his achievements for the betterment of society, not by his celestial status.¹²² The emphasis, thus, shifted towards the human strife for the betterment of all mankind.

With the completion of the Zhengtong Daoist canon in the fifteenth century and a growing number of texts discussing Xu Xun in Ming gazetteers, literati and religious institutions had an easier access to Xu Xun-related texts than ever before. In late Ming, Xu's figure reemerged in literati circles during spirit writing sessions, in discussions on inner alchemy, and in their travels to and writing about "famous sites" (*mingsheng* 名勝). Furthermore, a prophecy divining Xu Xun's return to the human world, accompanied by eight-hundred immortals, became a subject of debate among late-Ming literati. This prophecy, known as the Longsha prophecy (龍沙讖), predicted that Xu Xun will reappear sometime in the early seventeenth century, spurring

¹²⁰ The literati who edited and contributed content to local gazetteers had an impact on the fate of certain local cults, as their writing on local lore and practices (*tusu zhuanxin* 土俗傳信) paved the road for the official recognition of cults or their denouncement as illicit practices. The *tujing* 圖經 sections of local gazetteers were particularly crucial elements in the transformation and propagation of Xu reverence. Even Bai Yuchan's hagiography of Xu draws on this type of source. See Chen Xi 陳曦 and Wang Zhongjing 王忠敬, "Song Ming difangzhi yu Nanchang diqu Xu Xun Xinyang de bianqian" 宋明地方志与南昌地区许逊信仰的变迁" (*Wuhan daxue xuebao*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2014), p. 62.

¹²¹ Chen and Wang, "Song Ming difangzhi yu Nanchang diqu Xu Xun Xinyang de bianqian," pp. 56-64.

¹²² Specifically, he quotes Sima Guang saying: 祀功也，非祀仙也。See Chen Wenzhu 陳文燭 (1536-1595), "Lord Xu Temple Stele" 許真君廟碑, in the *Newly Revised Nanchang Prefecture Gazetteer (Xinxiu Nanchang fu zhi* 新修南昌府志), *juan* 28, dating 1588.

theories as to when, where, and how it will take place, and how should followers of Xu prepare for this miraculous event.¹²³ By late Ming, dramas, narrative texts, and short stories brought the legend of Xu to an unprecedentedly large and diverse audiences.

Considering that Xu Xun reverence declined (though it never disappeared entirely) after the seventeenth century, the last decades of the Ming mark the zenith of popular interest in Xu Xun. During this period, Xu Xun worship was widespread across the Chinese-speaking world, though it was still most popular in Jiangxi and the Jiangnan region, as well as in Northern Fujian (the area known as *minbei* 閩北). Jianyang, one of the largest and busiest capitals of commercial publishing in late Ming, was a flourishing center of Xu Xun worship during this time. An important example of the impact of the Xu Xun lore on the region is the emergence of the Lüshan sect 閩山派 in Northern Fujian during the Ming. The Lüshan sect was a local movement inspired by Jingming and Zhengyi Daoism that adopted Xu Xun as one of its leading patriarchs.¹²⁴ Local gazetteers describe the popularity of Xu Xun temples in the Jianyang area and attest to the profound influence of his reverence on the region.¹²⁵ Therefore it is not surprising to find authors-editors such as Deng Zhimo and Feng Menglong drawing on local

¹²³ See Zhang Yixi, “Feisheng chushi de qidai – Ming zhong wan qi shiren yu longsha chen,” pp. 1-57. This prophecy is included in nearly all Xu Xun hagiographies, using almost the same exact phrasing. In Bai Yuchan’s hagiography of Xu, it reads: 吾仙去後一千二百四十年間，豫章之境，五陵之內，當出地仙八百人，其師出於豫章，大揚吾教，郡江心忽生沙州，掩過井口者，是其時也。 In late Ming, it appears in numerous local gazetteer entries, including the abovementioned stele inscription by Chen Wenzhu.

¹²⁴ Some Lüshan temples in Fujian identify Xu Xun with Jiulang fazhu 九郎法主, though in Jianyang the title 九郎法主 is often used to designate two figures: Xu Xun and Xu Jia 徐甲. See Ye Mingsheng 葉明生 and John Lagerwey 勞格文, *Fujian sheng Jianyang shi Lüshan pai keyi ben* 福建省建陽市閩山派科儀本 (Taipei: Xinwen feng chuban gongsi, 2007), pp. 10-11, and 362-364.

¹²⁵ See for instance the *Jianjing fu zhi* 建寧府志, *juan* 48, p. 2797, and *juan* 50, p. 3042; *Guihua xianzhi* 歸化縣志, *juan* 10, p. 206; *Tingzhou fu zhi* 汀州府志, *juan* 3, p. 701, and others. See also Ye Mingsheng and John Lagerwey, *Fujian sheng Jianyang shi Lüshan pai keyi ben*, p. 363.

legends and staging scenes of Xu Xun's life in Northern Fujian. The composition of *The Iron Tree* marks the zenith of the popular interest in the legend and reverence of Xu Xun.

4.1. Traces of the Immortal: Sources on the Xu Xun lore and cult

Within the rich mosaic of the Xu Xun lore, we should distinguish between two types of sources: texts and images that are directly related to Xu Xun's person and attributes on the one hand, and those that appropriate the Xu Xun "brand," that is, tap Xu's popularity by using his figure as a symbol but bear no relation to his specific person or life-story. The sources in the first category include over two dozen hagiographies in official histories, local gazetteers, anthologies of *zhiguai* accounts, canonical texts, stele inscriptions, personal notes (*biji*), and sectarian literature. Several works of drama and narrative writing from late Ming also belong to this group. These hagiographical sources focus on Xu Xun's life story, his attributes, the miracles he performed, and the history of his cultic worship. However, they do not delve into the details of the teachings and practices that allowed him to attain immortality.

Sources of the second category, those that merely use Xu Xun's name without relating to his specific figure or personal history, mostly include texts attributed to Xu Xun or profess to contain divine knowledge that Xu Xun received from heaven. The content of these texts does not exemplify any intrinsic ties to Xu Xun's lore. For instance, the *Lingjianzi* 靈劍子 and its accompanied guide are both attributed to Xu Xun.¹²⁶ Several Southern Song scriptures and commentaries of the Jingming Daoist sect are likewise attributed to Xu, though they were

¹²⁶ The *Lingjianzi* 靈劍子 and the *Lingjianzi yindao zi wu* 劍子引導子午記 are both included in the Daoist canon, DZ 570 (正統道藏, 洞玄部).

composed centuries after his death (or ascension).¹²⁷ Another example is the horoscopic manual *Xu zhenjun yu xia ji* 許真君玉匣記 (dating 1434), supposedly received by Xu Xun from heaven so that he would transmit it to all of mankind.¹²⁸ Only the first few lines in the preface of this manual relate to “Xu Xun of Jingyang” and succinctly mention some of the miracles he is known for. The rest of the manual stands independently, and could have easily been attributed to any other iconic figure.

The mysterious scripture *Tongfu tiejuan* 銅符鐵券 poses a somewhat different challenge. Most Xu Xun hagiographies list this scripture among the materials that the female Daoist Chenmu received from heaven (via the saint Langong) under the divine order to transmit them to Xu Xun. Nevertheless, Xu’s hagiographies only mention this text by title, without divulging any information about its content. A text bearing this title appears in the Daoist canon and profess to be indeed that heavenly-bestowed knowledge.¹²⁹ It is divided into sections of “secret knowledge” (*jue* 訣) expounding on inner alchemy practices of the Zhong-Lu school (Lu Dongbin is also mentioned in the text). Although Xu Xun and Chenmu are named as the recipients and transmitters of this teaching, they are entirely inconsequential to the contents of this text. In other words, there is an enduring gap between the teaching and its vehicles; the specific personages and life-stories of the figures who received and disseminated this knowledge have no intrinsic

¹²⁷ The anonymous *Taishang dongxuan lingbao feixian duren jingfa* 太上洞玄靈寶飛仙度人經法 (CT 560-563) is supposedly a commentary by Xu Xun (高明大使神功妙濟真君許旌陽釋) for the text *Lingbao duren jing* 靈寶度人經. The *Taishang jingming yuan buzouzhiju taixuan dousheng xuzhi* 太上淨明院補奏職局太玄都省須知, a brief guide to the administration of the divine realm, is accompanied by a commentary that is likewise attributed to Xu Xun.

¹²⁸ *Xu zhenjun yu xia ji* 許真君玉匣記, in the supplement to the Daoist canon from the Wanli period, CT 1480, or 正統道藏續道藏, 58.

¹²⁹ See *Tongfu tiejuan* 銅符鐵券, *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要, no. 137.

connection to the practices or teachings themselves. Since the numerous hagiographies that mention this scripture do not disclose anything about its content, the two sources stand independently from each other. The connection between doctrinal or sectarian texts like the *Tongfu tiejuan* and the Xu Xun lore seem to be as circumstantial as the appropriation of his figure by the Jingming Dao.

Sources of the second category, predominantly sectarian and doctrinal texts, reveal very little about Xu Xun's popular reverence, or how his legend was experienced by lay literati and commoners. Our best sources to learn how Xu Xun was perceived and worshiped are the sources that belong to the first category – his numerous hagiographies. Not only do they reflect how Xu was imagined, but they also provide rare glimpses into some of the festivals and rituals practiced in his cult. Many of them recount how Xu Xun's house—the place of his ascension—and the relics supposedly left by the family were at the center of Xu worship.¹³⁰ They reveal that iconic portrayals of Xu in statues and frescos were equally cardinal to his worship: his statue was paraded in procession along all the sites associated with his famous battles against demonic dragons and vipers. Moreover, Xu's hagiographies reveal regional organization networks that accepted the Lingbao liturgical framework and adopted its rituals.

Establishing a clear trajectory of the cult's history, its temples, and its lineage was of cardinal importance to the compilers of Xu Xun's hagiographies. “The Record of the Eighty-Five Transformations of the Perfected Lord Xu of West Mountain” (*Xishan Xu zhenjun bashiwu hua lu* 西山許真君八十五化錄, preface dates 1246) describes the development of the Xu cult from the moment of his ascension (when his residence was converted into a shrine) down to the

¹³⁰ Huang Xiaoshi distinguishes between two levels of popular worship of Xu Xun: reverence by sacrifice in a shrine (*citang* 祠堂) on the one hand, and practices that elicited Xu Xun's divine assistance with inner-alchemical cultivation, bringing rain, and curing illnesses on the other hand. See Huang, *Jingming Dao yanjiu*, pp. 14-15

imperial titles and decrees granted by Emperors Taizong, Zhenzong, and Renzong of the Northern Song and the patronage of Emperor Huizong.¹³¹ In fact, episodes 51-53 include a first-person account by Emperor Huizong, who renovated Xu's temple and revived his cult after Xu Xun revealed himself in a dream. Emperor Huizong's decrees are included in the text in full. Moreover, episodes 63-68 describe Xu's temple festivals as huge gatherings consisting mostly of purification and exorcistic rites. Its colophon uses the text as a platform to advertise the construction of new temples honoring Xu Xun and express gratitude to their financial patrons.¹³²

As part of an ongoing attempt to form a lineage within the Xu Xun cult, the composition and transmission of Xu's hagiographies were often attributed (sometimes anachronistically) to his closest disciples, relatives, and successors. The editing of the abovementioned *Eighty-Five Transformations* is attributed to Shi Cen 施岑, one of Xu Xun's closest disciples and one of the Twelve Perfected.¹³³ The lost Tang Dynasty text *Hagiographies of the Twelve Perfected* (*shi'er zhenjun zhuan* 十二真君傳), attributed to the devotee Hu Huichao 胡慧超 (d. 703),¹³⁴ is

¹³¹ These take up episodes 50-68. This historical sketch of the cult is anachronistic considering that Shi Cen, the supposed editor of this text, lived during the Jin era.

¹³² The text acknowledges the financial support of a lay person named Wang, who supplied the funds for building a temple near a more famous religious landmark, the Tianqing guan 天慶觀. Finally, Shi Cen thanks a certain Xie Daoxian (probably a lay Daoist) for financing the production of this text. i.e., the carving of woodblocks, printing, and distribution.

¹³³ Interestingly, Shi Cen himself appears in this hagiography as one of Xu Xun's most prominent disciples, and receives a brief hagiography of his own toward the end of the text, along with the other Twelve Perfected. In a colophon signed by Shi Ce, the author delineates the textual history of the *Eighty-Five Transformations* by listing the people who transmitted the text to him, thank those who helped him edit the text, and explain the changes he introduced. The colophon mentions eight individuals and two texts that formed the basis for Shi Ce's version (the *Xishan zhuanji* 西山傳記 and *Shi'er zhenjun zhuan* 十二真君傳 mentioned above). The colophon credits Shi Ce with correcting, supplementing, and rearranging the material into eighty-five chapters, each accompanied by a poem.

¹³⁴ This lost text was probably the earliest joint hagiographic account of Xu Xun and Wu Meng. In all likelihood, Hu Huichao drew on Six-Dynasties texts. The *Taiping Guangji* and Daoist canonical texts (such as the *Eighty-Five Transformations*) quote from this lost text.

frequently quoted by extant sources and might have formed the basis for the earliest hagiography of Xu Xun that survives intact: the supposedly Tang-dynasty *Hagiographies of the Perfected Wu and Xu of the Filial Dao*. It describes the rituals conducted during the anniversary of the ascent of Xu Xun, including lists of important dates and offerings. This ceremony reads as a Lingbao standardized ritual, akin to that codified in Du Guangting's *Ritual of the Most High Yellow Register Retreat* (*taishang huang lu zhai yi* 太上黃籙齋儀).¹³⁵ The text also depicts Xu Xun worship as closely connected to Filial Daoism, which Xu Xun's nephew, Xu Jian 許簡, is credited with propagating. Finally, by listing the descendants of Xu Jian for seventeen generations, this hagiography provides a clear image of Xu Xun's ancestral line.

The most important Song hagiography of Xu Xun, which came to form the basis for later works, including late-Ming narrative texts, is the “Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan” 旌陽許真君傳 by the famous Song-Dynasty Daoist thinker Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾.¹³⁶ Bai might be our best source to learn about Xu Xun reverence, both from a doctrinal and popular perspectives. Bai was not only an expert in practices of immortality (particularly inner alchemy), but he was also deeply

¹³⁵ This hagiography describes how the local community invites Daoist Masters to conduct the ceremony of the “Great Retreat of the Yellow Register,” while the people pray and burn incense. This is followed by the ritual of “Throwing Dragon Tablets” that are deposited in the lake grotto (從晉元康二年真君舉家飛升之後，至唐元和十四年約五百六十二年，遞代相承，四鄉百姓聚會於觀設黃籙大齋，邀請道流三日三夜升壇進表，上達玄元，作禮焚香克意誠請，存亡獲福，方休暇焉，鏤券投龍悉歸斯潭洞矣). Du Guangting 杜光庭, *Ritual of the Most High Yellow Register Retreat* 太上黃籙齋儀, Daoist Canon CT 507 (正統道藏, 洞玄部, 威儀類).

¹³⁶ Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾, “Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan” 旌陽許真君傳 in *Bai Yuchan quan ji: Daojiao nanzong Bai Yuchan zhenren xiulian dian ji* 白玉蟾全集: 道教南宗白玉蟾真人修煉典籍 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2013), pp. 61-72 or *Bai Yuchan quanji* 白玉蟾全集 (Taipei: Ziyou chubanshe, 1969), vol. 3, pp. 1013-1040. Interestingly, the anthology of Bai Yuchan's writings is titled *Yulong ji* 玉隆集 (preserved in the anonymously compiled *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書), alluding to Xu Xun's cult center, the Yulong gong - the name that Emperor Song Zhenzong bestowed on Xu Xun's shrine. Regarding Bai Yuchan's life and writing, see Liu Liang 刘亮, *Bai Yuchan shengping yu wenxue chuanguo yanjiu* 白玉蟾生平与文学创作研究 (Nanjing: Feng huang chubanshe 2012). Lowell Skar, “Bai Yuchan,” in Pregadio, Fabrizio, ed. *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), v.1, pp. 203-206.

interested in Xu Xun's legend and even traveled to Xu Xun's cult center.¹³⁷ According to Bai, three walls in the front hall of the Yulong gong were covered with murals depicting the life of Xu, and murals portraying his annual processions were found elsewhere in the temple.¹³⁸ In his hagiography of Xu Xun, Bai Yuchan summarizes the development of the Xu cult since the Tang Dynasty, thus providing us with some notion of how the history of the Xu cult was perceived at the time. Bai also sheds some light on the rituals and festivals taking place at the Xu Xun cult center during his time. He describes a *jiao* ceremony decreed by Emperor Huizong at the Yulong gong 玉隆宮 spanning seven days and seven nights. The icon of Xu Xun's son-in-law, Lord Huang, was brought to the Yulong gong every autumn, and every three years Xu Xun's image would be carried to visit his daughter and son-in-law in their temple. Xu Xun and Lord Huang's icons were carried in palanquins decorated with carvings of white horses and golden phoenixes, accompanied by people wearing elaborate headdresses. During these processions, locals would greet the images of Xu Xun and Lord Huang with offerings.¹³⁹ Bai hypothesized that these customs go back to the fourth or fifth century.

Bai Yuchan's hagiography of Xu Xun ties him to the teaching of the Jingming Dao and particularly its more politically-oriented *zhongxiao* 忠孝 strain. Bai details a series of instructions for practicing the methods that Xu bequeathed to his disciples and his preparations for ascension (which includes fasting, a *jiao* ceremony, talismans, and incantations). According

¹³⁷ Bai Yuchan dedicated three essays to his visits to Xishan and the Yulong gong, but he focused on the surrounding scenery and his encounters with friends and recluses. See "Longsha xian hui ge ji: Yulong gong" 龍沙仙會閣記: 玉隆宮, vol. 1, pp. 266-269; "Yulong wanshou gong Yunhui tang ji" 玉隆萬壽宮雲會堂記, vol. 1, pp. 274-281; "Yulong wanshou gong Dao yuan ji" 玉隆萬壽宮道院記, vol. 1, pp. 281-287.

¹³⁸ Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, p. 316.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

to Bai, before Xu Xun ascended to heaven, he wrote the *Lingjianzi* and a collection of admonishing poems. Among the various techniques that Xu Xun received from Chenmu, Bai lists the “five thunder methods” (五雷法), probably a fusion of pre-Song exorcistic practices with inner alchemy theories.¹⁴⁰ Yet including these rituals in Xu’s hagiography might reflect Bai Yuchan’s own interest in thunder rites rather than indicate a real connection to the Xu Xun lore, which remains unclear.¹⁴¹ By contrast, Bai’s work clarifies the pivotal role that Xu Xun’s early roots in the Xishan region in Jiangxi played in his worship. This local connection was further expanded when this hagiography was incorporated into the Daoist canon in the fifteenth century: it was supplemented with commentary describing in detail over forty locations associated with the life-events of Xu Xun that Bai mentions in the text, thus intensifying the connection between lore and locale.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ The exact phrasing is 今淨明法五雷法之類皆時所授也. See Bai Yuchan, “Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan” 旌陽許真君傳 in *Bai Yuchan quan ji: Daojiao nanzong Bai Yuchan zhenren xiulian dian ji* 白玉蟾全集: 道教南宗白玉蟾真人修煉典籍 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2013), pp. 63. The commentary added to his text in the Daoist canon also ties these methods to Jingming Daoist rituals and thunder rites practiced in the Ming. Thunder rites are not mentioned in the earlier extant hagiographies of Xu, the *Xiaodao Wu Xu er zhenjun zhuan* and *Xu zhenjun xian zhuan*. However, this piece of detail is also mentioned in the *Eighty-Five Transformations*, in Deng Zhimo’s *Tieshuji* and Feng Menglong’s short stories – all follow Bai Yuchan’s version. Several Xu Xun hagiographies show him summoning thunder to vanquish a demonic serpent.

¹⁴¹ Florian C. Reiter, “Taoist Thunder Magic (五雷法), Illustrated with the Example of the Divine Protector Chao Kung-ming 趙公明” (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 160, no. 1, 2010), pp. 151. Bai’s hagiography of Xu was written at a time when Bai and other Daoists “elaborated, rationalized, and codified thunder rituals.” Interestingly, Reiter goes on to mention accounts of using thunder rites to vanquish river demons; Reiter mentions Sa Shoujian, but he does not mention Xu Xun, although his legend is just as relevant in this context. Regarding thunder rites, see also Lowell Skar, “Leifa [Thunder Rites; Thunder Rituals],” in Pregadio, Fabrizio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), Vol. 1, pp. 627-629. Regarding thunder rituals in late-Ming narrative texts, see Mark Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, territorial networks, and the history of a Ming novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

¹⁴² Bai Yuchan’s hagiography of Xu Xun formed the basis of several textual and pictorial hagiographies of Xu since the Southern Song. Particularly noteworthy is the standard Jingming hagiography of Xu, “Hagiography of the Jingming Daoist Master the Perfected Xu of Jingyang” (*Jingming daoshi Jingyang Xu zhenjun* 淨明道師旌陽許真君) is included in the *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu* 淨明忠孝全書 (DZ 1110). The last third of this work describes Xu Xun’s centuries-old legacy: the development of his temple worship, the survival of his “traces” (*yiji* 遺跡), the imperial patronage of his cult (including a Song-dynasty imperial edict), and ending with a list of miracles associated with Xu Xun that prove the efficacy of his extraordinary abilities. See Guo Wu 郭武, *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu yanjiu: yi Song, Yuan shehui wei beijing de kaocha* 淨明忠孝全書研究: 以宋元社會為背景的考察 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005). Regarding Jingming Dao hagiographies of Xu Xun, see Boltz,

It is worth mentioning Xu Xun's loyal acolytes and disciples, who not only play a prominent role in his lore, but are also the subject of worship and hagiographic traditions in their own right. Chief among them is Wu Meng 吳猛, whose cult in fact preceded that of Xu Xun, who was previously depicted as Wu Meng's disciple.¹⁴³ Another important companion of Xu Xun is the Daoist immortal Guo Pu 郭璞, who travels with Xu and helps him find the ideal location to practice his self-cultivation rituals.¹⁴⁴ In many of his hagiographies, Xu Xun is also accompanied in his journeys by a group of disciples known as the Twelve Perfected (*shi'er zhenjun* 十二真君), which came to be associated with the Xu Xun lore during the reign of Emperor Gaozong (649-683).¹⁴⁵ Most sources depict the formation of this group as the result of a test that Xu Xun had given to his followers. As the story goes, on the eve of the battle with a demonic dragon, Xu transformed a piece of coal into a beautiful woman and sent her into the camp at night. In the morning, only twelve disciples remained clean and spotless—that is, not tempted by the “coal woman”—earning the master's trust and the right to accompany him on the

A Survey of Taoist Literature, pp. 70-78. An early-Qing dynasty compendium, the *Jingming zongjiao lu* 淨明宗教錄, included this hagiography, though it also introduced some changes to the original text. Chen Lili and Zou Fushui date this work 1691; see Chen Lili 陳立立 and Zou Fushui 鄒付水, *Jingming zongjiao lu* 淨明宗教錄 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2009).

¹⁴³ One of Wu Meng's earliest bio-hagiographical portrayals is found in the *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (*juan* 1). According to Zhang Zehong, it was only at a later stage that Xu Xun was elevated to the status of a deity while Wu Meng was demoted to the status of acolyte. Zhang argues that this reversal of roles stems from the immense influence of the Xu clan that propagated the Xishan cult. This could also explain why the Twelve Perfected of the Jingming dao sect were supposedly Xu Xun's relatives. See Zhang Zehong, “Xu Xun yu Wu Meng,” p. 70-73. Li Fengmao similarly traces the narrative of the saint combatting a water-dragon to the Wu Meng myth cycle, as recorded in the Eastern Jin text *Yuzhang ji* 豫章記; see Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 85. See also Akizuki Kanei, *Chūgoku kinsei Dōkyō no keisei*, pp. 6-8.

¹⁴⁴ Guo Pu was not only celebrated as a Daoist adept and expert in geomancy (*fengshui*), but also the supposed author of the *Dili zangshu* 地理葬書 and annotator of numerous works, such as the *Shanhai jing* 山海經.

¹⁴⁵ There are some inconsistencies in the formation of the Twelve Perfected; sometimes Xu Xun and Wu Meng count as one of the twelve. In some versions, it is Wu Meng who tests his disciples with the “coal woman,” and only Xu Xun remains clean. See table summarizing the appearances of the Twelve Perfected in Xu Xun hagiographies in Akizuki Kanei, *Zhongguo jin shi dao jiao de xing cheng*, p. 36, note 7.

exorcistic voyages ahead.¹⁴⁶ This story reflects the often-paradoxical approach to asceticism in the Xu Xun lore, vacillating between supporting celibacy as condition for spiritual attainment on the one hand, and advocating family life and social involvement as critical aspects of the correct path, on the other.¹⁴⁷

By late Ming, Xu Xun was widely revered as an altruistic saint who bridged the Confucian mores of filial piety and the Daoist search for immortality. Although Xu is depicted as an itinerant adept, roaming with immortals and cultivating himself through inner alchemical practices, he is also celebrated as a devoted magistrate and remains a family man to the very last, eventually ascending to heaven together with his entire household, “including the dogs and chickens.” The model of spiritual attainment that Xu Xun represents offers an interesting compromise between the ostensibly contradictory obligations of filial piety and public service, and Daoist self-cultivation. The legend of Xu Xun thus conflates two types of popular heroes: the earthly paragon of filial piety and honest governing, with that of the miracle-working exorcist-healer. The pinnacle of this conflation is, of course, Xu Xun’s subjugation of the Sinful Dragon of Poyang Lake. The bond that holds this multifaceted legend together is Xu’s unfailing devotion to the corporeal and spiritual well-being of the people, whether in the human world or as part of the divine bureaucracy. Contrary to the otherworldly, carefree roaming of immortals like Lü Dongbin, who is the subject of Chapter 4, Xu Xun represents a form of attainment that places the world at the center: society is not conceived of as an impediment to attainment, but rather its instrument and its end.

¹⁴⁶ This scene appears in chapter 11 of *The Iron Tree*.

¹⁴⁷ These contrasting models of attainment will be discussed in further depth in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, which focuses on asceticism and Daoist self-cultivation in late-Ming origin narratives.

4.2. Facing the Immortal: Visual Sources

The vast majority of the public did not experience the legend of Xu Xun through the textual corpus that we invariably rely upon to study his lore. The abovementioned hagiographical and historiographical texts do not represent the experiences of the multitudes who created, sustained, and spread Xu Xun reverence. Unfortunately, extant sources neither describe oral traditions nor provide us with much information about the visual experience of visiting Xu's temples. Stevens and Welch's 1998 field research in his cult center in Xishan shed some light on twentieth-century visual temple representation of Xu Xun:

“The main altar in Xu's hall bears two images of Xu, one tall gilded statue of Xu standing, and a smaller, portable image of him sitting swathed in red robes. Neither has any unique characteristic and he is depicted with a black beard, pink face and holding a tablet in both hands before his chest. He is attended by two youthful attendants. ... Of more interest were the half a dozen small rooms similar to horse boxes with half-doors which lined the rest of the far side, each containing a small tableau of life-size simple and gaudily painted plaster and cement figures. These were identified as **episodic scenes from the life of Xu** ranging from his miraculous birth, borne to Earth by the Celestial Immortal Tian Fei, to his apotheosis when he was about to be borne off to Heaven; he is portrayed in one scene preparing medicinal drinks and in another overcoming the flood dragon. A popular legend related in Jiangxi about Xu describes how he destroyed a monstrous snake which had been terrorising the areas of western Jiangxi. Another describes how in Changsha in neighbouring Hunan province he killed a dragon which had transformed itself into a woman and had married a local mandarin.”¹⁴⁸

While it is difficult to clearly establish the relationship between the visual portrayals of an icon in texts, at temples, and on stage, we must consider a possible connection between visual

¹⁴⁸ Keith Stevens and Jennifer Welch, “Xu, The Daoist Perfected Lord Xu Zhenjun (許真君) The Protective Deity of Jiangxi Province” (*Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol.38, 1998), pp. 137-140. Stevens and Welch add that all the images in the temple are new, as the temple suffered substantial ruin during the first decades of the PRC. Therefore, even if these images follow the model of those that were destroyed, we should still tread carefully when using these portrayals to learn about late-imperial visualization of Xu's life.

representations of Xu Xun in temples and his pictorial hagiographies.¹⁴⁹ The anonymous thirteenth-century *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan* 許太史真君圖傳 is composed of a series of fifty-three units of text-and-image. Its narrative follows Bai Yuchan’s hagiography very closely.¹⁵⁰



Figure 11: Xu Xun erects the Iron Tree, from *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan*

Two centuries later, Zhu Gonggui 朱拱楨 of Yiyang 弋陽, Jiangxi, compiled an exquisite pictorial hagiography of Xu Xun, titled *Zhenxian shiji* 真仙事跡, which was

¹⁴⁹ Regarding pictorial hagiographies, see Julia K Murray, “The Evolution of Pictorial Hagiography in Chinese Art: common themes and forms” (*Arts Asiaquies*, no. 55, 2000), pp. 81-97, and Benjamin Penny, “Laojun bashiyi hua tu [Eighty-One Transformations of Lord Lao, Illustrated; an illustrated hagiography of Laozi]” in Pregadio, Fabrizio, ed. *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008) v.1, pp. 606-607.

¹⁵⁰ This pictorial hagiography opens with two (unillustrated) prefaces: the “Yulong xizhao” 玉陛錫詔, (“the imperial order granted on the jade steps”) which includes an edict from the Jade Emperor delivered to Xu Xun by two immortals, and the “Zhenjun shenggao” 真君聖誥 (“granting the divine title Perfected Saint”), which lists Xu Xun’s titles and praises his filiality and humaneness.

accompanied by sixty paintings by the artist Xie Shichen 謝時臣 (1488-unknown).¹⁵¹ This album, dating to 1546, seems to have been prepared as a gift for Emperor Ming Shizong, a great patron of Daoism.¹⁵² It draws heavily from canonical sources on Xu Xun, and particularly the aforementioned *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan*. It also provides us with rare visual records of Xu Xun reverence in the sixteenth century, at least from the artist's point of view.¹⁵³



Figure 12: the birth of Xu Xun; plate 8 in *Zhenxian shiji*

¹⁵¹ On Xie Shichen, see Scarlett Jang Ju-yu, “Form, Content, and Audience: A Common Theme in Painting and Woodblock-Printed Books of the Ming Dynasty” (*Ars Orientalis*, vol. 27, 1997), pp. 1-26.

¹⁵² The manuscript is housed in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia; a digital version is available through the museum's website (<http://collection-online.moa.ubc.ca/collection-online/search?keywords=1018>). Although some scholars have mentioned it in passing, this fascinating album has not yet been examined closely. See Richard G. Wang, *The Ming Prince and Daoism: Institutional Patronage of an Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 69, note 46.

¹⁵³ *Zhenxian shiji*, plates 1018/27 and 1018/28.



Figure 13: Xu Xun and his acolytes fight the dragon; plate 68 in *Zhenxian shiji*



Figure 14: Xu Xun oversees the erection of the Iron Tree; plate 92 in *Zhenxian shiji*



Figure 15: Xu Xun ascends to heaven; plate 110 in *Zhenxian shiji*.

Scholars have recently raised questions concerning this complicated relationship in regards to the illustrated hagiographies of Laozi (*taishang laojun bashiyi hua tushuo* 太上老君八十一化圖說), the hagiographic murals at the Yongle gong in Shanxi depicting the life of Lü Dongbin, as well as temple murals depicting the life of Baogong in mainland China and Taiwan.¹⁵⁴ The profound connections that Grootaers found between visual depictions of Zhenwu in temple murals in north China and the portrayal of Zhenwu in the origin narrative text *Journey to the North* likewise highlight the close relationship between ritual, image, and narrative.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ See Murray, "The Evolution of Pictorial Hagiography in Chinese Art," pp. 81-93; Katz, *ibid.*; and Noga Ganany, "Judge in the Realm of the Living by Day, Judge in the Netherworld by Night: Bao-gong in Ming Fiction and Religious Worship" (MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2011), pp. 153-155 and 171-177.

¹⁵⁵ Willem Grootaers, "The Hagiography of the Chinese God Chen-wu" (*Folklore Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1952), pp. 139-181. See also Brigitte Baptandier, *The lady of Linshui: a Chinese female cult* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Aside from historiographical value and artistic appreciation, these pictorial hagiographies might have fulfilled several simultaneous functions. Celebrating the saintly conduct of Xu and his acolytes as paragons of virtue played the didactic roles of propagating worship and urging readers-viewers to improve their own conduct.¹⁵⁶ They also fulfilled an iconic function in cementing the images of protagonists and episodes in the memory of the audience. Moreover, pictorial hagiographies might have also been used as worship aids and exorcistic charms.¹⁵⁷ The iconic portrayals of Xu Xun and inclusion of talismans alongside the tales of his saintly life offer a range of possibilities for ritual and reverence: the illustrated text might not have been limited to representation – its reading might also have been performative.

Late-Ming literati not only encountered the legend of Xu Xun in discussions on Daoist self-cultivation and spirit writing sessions, but also celebrated his figure in poetry and art. For instance, in a 1643 painting by the late-Ming artist Lan Ying titled “Zhi and Xu’s Pure Conversation”, the Buddhist monk Zhidun (314-366) and his contemporary Xu Xun are depicted sitting on a river bank by a grove of trees, engaged in philosophical discussion. Lan Ying’s poem reads:

“In the Six Dynasties there were many extraordinary people,
They all retreated into Taoism and Buddhism.
[The Buddhist monk] Chih-tun and the Taoist master Hsü Hsün
Were quite compatible with each other in ideas and temperament.
Beneath aged pines and ancient cliffs
They would engage the whole day in lofty conversation.
Worldly ambition they pitched like a stone into the flowing water,
Instead, they would rather enjoy their own company in search of good poetry.
Worldly affairs should be left outside of the world –

¹⁵⁶ Somewhat similarly to the function of illustrations of the courts of hell; see Stephen Teiser, “Having Once Died and Returned to Life’: Representations of Hell in Medieval China” (*HJAS*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1988), pp. 433-464.

¹⁵⁷ Scholars have highlighted the ritual purposes of murals and illustrations depicting the lives of saints and gods; see Paul R. Katz, *Images of the Immortal: the cult of Lü Dongbin at the Palace of Eternal Joy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), pp. 131-176. I argue that we should similarly consider Xu Xun’s pictorial hagiographies within the context of reverence.

This I understand, even though we are separated by a thousand autumns.”¹⁵⁸

Theatrical portrayals of Xu Xun before the late Ming remain somewhat of a mystery.

Only one drama that features Xu Xun as main protagonist is extant: the anonymous *zaju* play *Xu zhenren ba zha feisheng* 許真人拔宅飛昇, printed by a Yu-family publishing house in 1607.¹⁵⁹

This play does not attempt to offer a complete hagiographic portrayal of Xu; rather, it focuses on the two most iconic episodes in Xu Xun’s legendary life: his role as magistrate of Jingyang and his arduous struggle against the dragon of Poyang Lake. This drama is particularly noteworthy for its unusually-comical and critical depiction of Xu Xun, a sharp break from his typical saintly portrayals.¹⁶⁰ Another unusual feature of this play is its portrayal of Daoist alchemical practices. The fourth act shows Xu Xun and his family consuming actual, physical golden cinnabar (*jindan* 金丹). Although this play does not stray very far from Xu Xun’s hagiographical tradition, it offers a different perspective of the celebrated Xu that sheds new light on laypeople’s critiques and demands of a Daoist saint.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Wai-kam Ho et al., *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: the collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press; Bloomington, Indiana: Distributed by Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 252-253.

¹⁵⁹ It was printed in the *Maiwang guan* 脈望館. We know that Xu Xun was celebrated in other dramas, such as the *Xu zhenjunzhan jiao ji* 許真君斬蛟記 and the *Ta jing yuan* 獼鏡緣 that are no longer extant. Xu Xun appears in minor roles in several plays that did survive (such as *Tanhua ji* 曇花記 and *Lidan ji* 李丹記), and some dramatic scenes take place in Xu Xun temples (the first act of the *Sixiji* 四喜記, for instance), but these appearances tell us little about how he was perceived.

¹⁶⁰ I do not regard this drama as hagiographical primarily because it only deals with a specific stage in Xu Xun’s life, and does not recount his life story in its entirety.

¹⁶¹ See also Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 138-140 and 153-157.

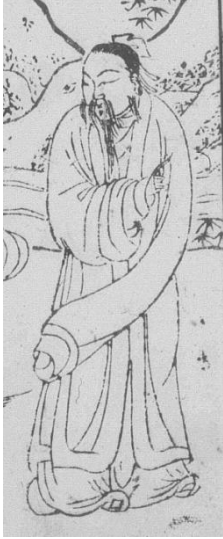


Figure 16: portrait of Xu Xun in *The Iron Tree*

5. Conclusions

The late Ming experienced a renewed interest in the life story of Xu Xun that is credited to the Wanli-era hagiographic vogue in publishing (discussed in Chapter 1) on the one hand, and the intensification of Xu Xun reverence in the Jiangnan region, on the other. Whether through temple worship, performances, or writing, the Xu Xun lore accrued new relevance and significance around the turn of the seventeenth century. During this period, early hagiographies of Xu Xun were reprinted in the Daoist canon, while summaries and excerpts from Xu Xun's hagiographies were included in gazetteers, anthologies, and encyclopedias, from the *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會 and the *Soushen Daquan* 搜神大全 to the *Da Ming yitong mingsheng zhi* 大明一統名勝志. Yet the longest, most elaborate, and most comprehensive retelling of Xu Xun's life remains *The Iron Tree*.

The Iron Tree represents a watershed in the Xu Xun lore. By consolidating the various facets of Xu Xun's legend, his "sacred geography," and the doctrines and practices associated with him within the framework of a narrative text, *The Iron Tree* offered for the first time a

holistic portrait of Xu Xun as a cultural icon. In the course of Xu Xun's travels, miracle working, and exorcistic fiats, *The Iron Tree* provides an informative and cinematic depiction of the places associated with the Xu Xun lore, a narrative roadmap to his "sacred geography." The book furthermore represents the first attempt to bridge the disparate facets of Xu Xun worship, from his local cult as a dragon-combatting water deity to his position as the patriarch of the Jingming Daoist sect. As discussed above, Xu's association with the Jingming Dao is more a product of geographical and historical circumstances than it is related to his person or legend, and therefore creates an enduring tension in his lore - primarily because it conflates two forms of reverence: one that centers on the icon as a person (in which his hagiography and local lore are of chief importance) and another that focuses on the teaching and practices of the sect (for which the icon is merely an emblem). This tension is far from unique; the formative period for the Xu Xun lore discussed above was also a period of intense negotiation between various competing local cults, exorcistic lineages, and Daoist sects.¹⁶² This dialectic resulted, among other things, in the appropriation of local saints and traditions by Daoist institutions. By incorporating into the narrative of *The Iron Tree* doctrinal excerpts of Jingming teachings and by expanding Xu's life story to include demonstrations of his filial piety, Deng offered a hagiographically-based explanation to Xu Xun's position as patriarch of this "Filial Daoist" movement.

The comprehensiveness of *The Iron Tree* is not accidental, but rather the fruit of Deng Zhimo's intentional efforts to present an all-encompassing vision of Xu Xun through ardent research into the textual and oral sources of his legend, for the spiritual benefit of his future

¹⁶² See Lowell Skar, "Administering Thunder: a thirteen-century memorial deliberating the thunder rites" (*Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, vol. 9, 1996), pp. 161-178. According to Schipper, the juxtaposition of personal saint cults and Daoist liturgical rituals began in the Tang and was widespread by the Song. See Schipper, "Taoist Rituals and Local Cults in the T'ang Dynasty," pp. 832-833. See also Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

readers. Deng ends *The Iron Tree* with a personal address to the readers, in which he states that he composed this narrative after researching Xu Xun's "traces" (考尋遺蹟), searching and collating his "remnants" (搜檢殘編) in order to share this work with others in the hope that it will enable them to tread the path of the ordinary (*fan*) and the otherworldly (*xian*), until they can rejoice in the mind of the Dao. In this sense, it created an encyclopedic "master narrative" of the Xu Xun lore in an accessible and attractive format intended for a wide and diverse readership.

While Deng's "Saints Trilogy," as well as his other publications, attest to his profound interest and extensive knowledge of Jingming and Quanzhen Daoism, his relationship with what we might call Daoist teachings or Daoist figures was complicated. Our examination of this relationship of writers and publishers with "religious" issues should thus be attuned to the nuances of late-Ming cultural practice, wherein the vocabularies, traditions, and personages of Daoism and Buddhism were an inseparable part of daily life and cultural practice. The new urban culture of late Ming and its "culture of the reading public" as Ko phrases it, "is characterized by a blurring of traditional dualities and fluidity of boundaries – between gentry and merchant, male and female, morality and entertainment, public and private, philosophy and action, as well as fiction and reality. It is, in short, culture of the floating world."¹⁶³

In my Introduction, I argued that late-Ming origin narratives should not be viewed through the prism of "fiction" nor be categorized as "novels." In view of the centuries-long Xu Xun lore on the one hand, and what we know of book consumption circa 1600 on the other, *The Iron Tree* should likewise be released from the clutches of "fiction" and the "novel." In compiling *The Iron Tree*, Deng Zhimo followed closely the centuries-long hagiographical

¹⁶³ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p. 43.

tradition of Xu Xun. The earliest among the sources he consulted were modeled after biographies of historical personages and were most likely meant to be read as records of actual events. Hagiographies of Xu Xun after the Tang Dynasty reflect a gradual transition from a view of Xu as a regular, historical mortal toward a vision of Xu as a “descended immortal,” inherently a *xian*. This transition correlates with a broader shift in hagiographical writing from the Six Dynasties to the Song in depiction of extraordinary individuals: from one centering on their human and historically-based characteristics toward miraculous, a-historical, saintly portrayals.¹⁶⁴ Yet as “fantastic” as these portrayals may have become, they were neither regarded, nor functioned as, “fiction.”

The issue of fictionality becomes especially acute as we step into the realm of *xiaoshuo* writing in late Ming. In the seventeenth century, Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆 made an interesting distinction between fictional and non-fictional narratives: in his *dufa* 讀法 to the *Shuihu zhuan*, Jin wrote that Sima Qian “used language to transmit events” (以文運事) whereas the novel “creates events by means of language” (因文生事).¹⁶⁵ If we adopt Jin Shengtan’s view of the novel, and if we take the truth-claims of Deng Zhimo seriously, then we will have to conclude that even in the form of *xiaoshuo*, the life-story of Xu was not meant to be read as a work of fiction, and should not be confined to the notion of “novel.”

The encyclopedic scope of *The Iron Tree* showcases the late-Ming penchant for anthologizing in commercial publishing. In his examination of Yu Xiangdou’s encyclopedias, Wei Shang notes that late-Ming “editors claimed that their volumes allowed one to go about

¹⁶⁴ Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 19-20.

¹⁶⁵ Anthony C. Yu, “History, Fiction, and the Reading of Chinese Narrative” (*Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, Vol. 10, no. 1/2, July 1988), p. 7.

one's daily affairs without consulting other sources."¹⁶⁶ In providing a comprehensive sourcebook on Xu Xun, *The Iron Tree* represents a similar effort by Deng Zhimo, who spent the bulk of his writing-editing career in collating diverse materials for the practical usages of his readers. The range of Deng Zhimo's writing endeavors, from origin narratives through primers to anthologies, reflects two important aspects of late-Ming print culture: a commitment to propagate knowledge (historical, "religious," "literary," and otherwise) to a wide readership, and a tendency to bring together a range of different materials into a single work. Unlike compendia such as encyclopedias or local gazetteers, which collate and organize sources according to genre, origin narratives like *The Iron Tree* collapse genre boundaries and integrate different materials – inscriptions, edicts, esoteric formulas, etc. – into the continuum of a narrative texts. In this respect, they not only propagate local traditions to transregional audiences, but they also disseminate specialized knowledge to a wide public that previously did not have access to the traditional knowledge system.¹⁶⁷ Judging by Deng's paratextual comments (his prefaces and addresses to the readers), not only was he aware of his unique position to shape the popular perception of immortals like Xu Xun by propagating and interpreting materials that were previously inaccessible to the general public, but he even regarded it as a social duty and part of his own spiritual path.

In sum, Deng Zhimo's Saints Trilogy exemplifies three concomitant trends in late Ming: the growing popularity of Xu Xun reverence in southeast China, the renewed interest in hagiographical publishing, and the commercially-successful vogue of practical, encyclopedic compilations. *The Iron Tree* and contemporaneous origin narratives thus functioned as

¹⁶⁶ Shang Wei, "The Making of Everyday World," p. 68.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 71-73.

storehouses for knowledge, sourcebooks of the lore of cultural icons that consolidated their personas, places, and practices, and were thus inseparable from the world of everyday life.

Chapter 3

Exorcistic Journeys: the Travels of the Warrior God Zhenwu

1. Introduction	166
2. Zhenwu of the North	170
3. <i>Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North</i>	177
4. Into the Wild: Mountains in Zhenwu's Origin Story	188
5. Mount Wudang	197
5.1. Visiting the Mountain	209
5.2. Zhenwu and Wudang: Beyond the Mountain	212
6. The God's Tour: Zhenwu in Motion	215
7. Conclusions	224

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the significance of hagiographic narrative writing in the lore and cult of the god Zhenwu 真武 in the late Ming period, in which travel – of both protagonist and reader – looms large. Zhenwu's travels and his worshipers' pilgrimages are centered on Mount Wudang, which accordingly plays a key role in the commercially-printed *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* (hereafter *Origin*). The purpose of the following discussion is to shed light on the reading experience and functions of this narrative text when it was first published in 1602 by situating *Origin* within the broader cultural context of late-Ming China. In this respect, I will focus in particular on two cultural arenas that I argue furnished the reading experience of this narrative text: Zhenwu's cultic reverence and ritual practice, and representations of Mount Wudang in print culture. In the course of this chapter, I raise questions regarding the relationship between story and place, and between narrative and ritual. I argue that *Origin* constitute a worship aid of Zhenwu in narrative form, which functions as a cipher to Mount Wudang and the god's inter-realm journeys.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section provides a summarized overview of the history of the Zhenwu cult. The second examines the structure and characteristics of *Origin* and argues that at the time of its publication it functioned as both hagiography and a ritual manual of Zhenwu. The third section explores the role of mountains and the wilderness in the origin narrative of Zhenwu, central to which is Mount Wudang in Hubei Province, Zhenwu's cult center. The fourth section takes a closer look at the history and literature on Mount Wudang, examining geographic encyclopedias and travel writing that shed light on contemporaneous views of the mountain and its connection to Zhenwu reverence. The last section examines Zhenwu's voyages as bridging narrative and religious practice. It focuses primarily on two types of journeys: the god's exorcistic "inspection tours" in ritualistic processions, and Zhenwu's role as a divine emperor whose travels mirror those of the emperor on earth.

青山隱隱石壁 The green mountain conceals stone cliffs
柳綠飄飄奇花 Marvelous flowers flutter on the green willow,
四週山色勝玉 All around, the mountain colors surpass jade
真乃神仙造化 It is truly the work of gods and immortals!

---*Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*, Chapter 7

The late-Ming narrative text *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* recounts that the former crown prince of Jingle Kingdom, who was destined to become the warrior god Zhenwu, had cultivated himself in the depths of Mount Wudang 武當山 for forty-two years before he finally attained the Way. Watching him from above, the Celestial Worthy of Mysterious Harmony (*mile tianzun* 妙樂天尊) noticed that Zhenwu was still burdened by his mortal body, especially by his Five Viscera. He therefore cast a spell to render Zhenwu unconscious and

invited the Gutting God (*poudu shen* 剖肚神) to remove his stomach and intestines, and replace them with an immortal's robe and a silk belt. Zhenwu's stomach and intestines were buried under a cliff in Mount Wudang and covered by a rock, out of sight and out of mind. But not for long. Due to Zhenwu's cultivation practices on Mount Wudang, even his internal organs grew powerful. Buried under a crag in the mountain, Zhenwu's stomach became a Turtle Demon (*guiguai* 龜怪) and his intestines became a Snake Demon (*sheguai* 蛇怪).¹

Powerful as they may have been, these organs-turned-demons showed no inclination to follow in the righteous footsteps of Zhenwu. Alas, the Turtle Demon and the Snake Demon had a penchant for human vice; they liked nothing more than carousing and causing havoc in the human world. From their mountain hideout in the Water-Fire Cave (*shuihuo dong* 水火洞), they plotted to use their powers of transformation (*bianhua* 變化) and their command over other goblins (*xiaoyao* 小妖) to devour humans and kidnap beautiful women. The City God (*chenghuang* 城隍) and the Earth God (*tudi gong* 土地公) of Mount Wudang tried to stop them, but the demons proved too powerful; when threatened, they transformed themselves into mountains! Only Zhenwu, who by now assumed the title Emperor of the Dark Heavens of the North (*beifang xuantian shangdi* 北方玄天上帝), could control them. Disguised as a traveling Daoist, Zhenwu caught the demons unaware, and a fierce battle ensued. Zhenwu used his divine

¹ The episodes of the Turtle and Snake Demons take place in chapters 9 and 10 of *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*. In chapter 10, they are called “the two demons of the Wudang Water-Fire Cave” (武當水火洞二妖). Interestingly, although the demons seem to be aware of their origin as Zhenwu's internal organs, they consider themselves born under that crag in Mount Wudang (生於武當岩下); that is, divorced from Zhenwu's body but intimately linked to the mountain. During their battle with the City God, the demons remark that they have evolved from heaven and earth and achieved their powers after listening to the Law, i.e. through Zhenwu's practices (我等乃天地生成，聞法成功). A somewhat different account is given by modern Taiwanese sources, according to which Zhenwu was originally a filial butcher who cut out his own bowels and threw them into a river, where they became monsters. See Seaman, *Journey to the North*, p. 2.

powers to grow to cosmic dimensions, with his head reaching the thirty-three heavens and his feet treading the entire land (頭頂三十三天, 足踏五湖四海). Eventually, the only force that could defeat the Turtle and Snake Demons was the power of fire and water. As the emblem of water, the turtle was terrified of fire. Likewise, as the emblem of fire, the snake could not stand water. Now subjugated by Zhenwu, they became his Water and Fire Generals, his closest and most powerful allies against the dark forces, and a key part of his iconography.

This episode, which appears in chapters 9 and 10 of the late-Ming narrative text *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*, encapsulates the Zhenwu myth and its ties to Mount Wudang. Painting the tortuous internal struggle of the ascetic with a dash of humor, this episode deciphers the iconography of Zhenwu as a bi-product of his famous sojourn on Mount Wudang. It gives form to the perils and potential of Daoist self-cultivation, wherein the human body and its natural setting provide the means for spiritual attainment, as well as its greatest foes. As Lagerwey argues, “[Zhenwu’s] heroic battle with the forces of death and desire within himself was projected onto the landscape and lived by the ordinary pilgrim as the myth of the Perfect Warrior, and his integration of his own forces with those of nature at once paved the way for the literati’s aesthetic contemplation of nature and provided living proof of the efficacy of the cosmic system of which imperial ideology was an elaboration.”² Through the symbolism of the turtle and snake, this story furthermore evokes the centrality of the water-fire dyad in Daoist inner alchemy, which underlies the Zhenwu lore and ritual. Moreover, the turtle and the snake are concomitantly tied to the human, the demonic, and the divine: they originated in the human body of Zhenwu, but transformed into fiends, before finally being converted into divine generals.

² John Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wudang shan” in Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yu eds., *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 325.

The story of the turtle and snake showcases the profound connection between Zhenwu and Mount Wudang, advertising the role of Wudang as *axis mundi* in the Zhenwu lore and its importance as a cosmological nexus, a bridge to the otherworldly.



Figure 17: An eighteenth-century statue of Zhenwu, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (catalog no. 79.2.481). Notice the turtle and snake under Zhenwu

2. Zhenwu of the North

Zhenwu has been one of the most widely worshiped deities in the Chinese cultural world throughout the last millennium, both in terms of the geographic scope and the vitality of his reverence. Since the body of scholarly research dedicated to Zhenwu and his cult center in Mount Wudang is very extensive, the following sketch is only intended to provide a general introduction to the Zhenwu cult to facilitate the discussion below.³ Zhenwu is celebrated under

³ Notable studies of Zhenwu include Shin-yi Chao, *Daoist Ritual, State Religion, and Popular Practice: Zhenwu Worship from Song to Ming (960-1644)* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Pierre-Henry de-Bruyn, *Le Wudang shan: Histoire de Récits Fondateurs* (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2010); Noelle Giuffrida, “Representing the Daoist God Zhenwu, the Perfected Warrior, in Late-Imperial China” (doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 2008); Willem A. Grootaers, “the Hagiography of the Chinese God Chen-wu: the transmission of rural traditions in Chahar” (*Folklore Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1952), pp. 139-181; John Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History*

several names, including the Dark Warrior (Xuanwu 玄武), the Dark Warrior Lord (Xuandi 玄帝), and Emperor of the Dark Heavens (Xuanwu shangdi 玄天上帝), but I shall refer to him throughout this chapter as Zhenwu in order to maintain consistency and clarity.⁴

Until recently, scholars regarded the Zhenwu lore as a development of an early cult of an anthropomorphic stellar god of the north, but recent studies disputed this assertion.⁵ The term Xuanwu was applied to the northern quadrant of the twenty-eight “lunar mansions” (*xiu* 宿) since the Han dynasty. Some scholars trace Zhenwu’s association with the north and schools of yin-yang and the five-phases thought to Han textual sources, such as the *Huai nan zi* and the *Houhan shu*.⁶ Zhenwu already appears in Han Dynasty art (ceramic roof tiles, for instance) as the ancient symbol of the north, accompanied by his emblems the snake and tortoise. However, textual records suggest that a cult devoted to his worship originated only around the seventh century.⁷ Regardless of a direct historic connection, or lack thereof, between the ancient cult of the north deity and the late-imperial cult of Zhenwu, his cosmological significance as a representation of the direction north and its associated symbols is a crucial part of his lore and

(New York: Macmillan, 1987) and “The Pilgrimage to Wudang shan” in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* edited by Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 293-332; Mei Li 梅莉, *Mingqing shiqi wudangshan chaoshan jinxiang yanjiu* 明清时期武当山朝山进香研究 (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2007); Xu Daoling 许道龄, “Lun Xuanwu zhi qiyuan ji qi tuibian” 论玄武之起源及其蜕变 (*Shixue jikan*, vol. 5, 1947), pp. 223-240; and Richard G. Wang, “Qiyunshan as a Replica of Wudangshan and the Religious Landscape of the Ming Empire” (*Journal of Chinese Religions*, vol. 42, issue 1, 2014), pp. 28-66.

⁴ The change from Xuanwu to Zhenwu occurred during the Song dynasty, to avoid an imperial taboo; see Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, p. 3.

⁵ Pierre-Henry De Bruyn and Romeyn Taylor, for instance. See Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, p. 13.

⁶ Zhao Xiaowei 周晓薇, *Si you ji cong kao* 四游记丛考 (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she 2005), pp. 202-203.

⁷ See Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wudang Shan,” p. 295; Stephen Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, p. 291. In the Southern Song, Zhenwu was bestowed the title Emperor of the Dark Heavens (Xuantian shangdi 玄天上帝), which was confirmed by Yuan emperor in 1304; see Chao, *Daoist Ritual, State Religion, and Popular Practice*, p. 6.

worship. Zhenwu's emblems – the tortoise and the snake – likewise symbolize his connection to the north, the water phase, rainfall, and warfare.⁸ Zhenwu's association with the north could also explain his role as a warring, exorcist divine protector; in Chinese cosmology, the north is regarded as the origin of the demonic.⁹ In fact, Zhenwu's career as an exorcist began when he was an acolyte of the Emperor of the North, the sovereign of exorcism in Daoism and ruler of Fengdu 豐都; the “worship of Zhenwu as a member of the Four Saints, headed by Tianpeng 天蓬, in the administration of the North Emperor, was already in practice, at least among the elites in Fujian, by CE 975.”¹⁰

Placing and location play an important role in the Zhenwu lore, particularly in his association with the direction north.¹¹ In his extensive survey of Zhenwu temples during the 1950's, Grootaers noted that Zhenwu temples are invariably located “on the northern edge of the village on a high earthen tower or on top of the northern wall of the village.”¹² *Origin* likewise describes temples that were constructed in the northern part of the village and by the northern

⁸ The celestial dark turtle was used in ancient China to depict the constellation of the northern sky. The martial association of turtles may be related to their armor-like shell; see Chao, pp. 14-15. Zhenwu's symbolic association with the water phase accrued further meaning as he became increasingly tied with inner-alchemy practices since the Song Dynasty. In inner alchemy, the turtle and the snake represent the trigrams of *kan* 坎 and *li* 離 respectively. According to Chao, “exchanging the middle lines of the trigrams *kan* and *li* produces a metaphor indicating the practice of “refining essence into pneuma” (*lianjing huaqi* 煉精化氣), the first stage of the *neidan* practice.” See Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 64-65.

⁹ Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wudang shan,” p. 297.

¹⁰ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, p. 21.

¹¹ Zhenwu's association with the direction north, particularly with the Northern Dipper and the Pole Star, also played a central role in his cult in Japan, where he was adopted by esoteric Buddhism and revered as a war deity and a royal protector under the name Myōken 妙見. Zhenwu/Myōken worship was introduced to Japan by a Korean prince in the seventh century. He became the object of popular devotion and state ritual during the Heian period, and his cult experienced a revival during the Edo period. See Bernard Faure, *Gods of Medieval Japan, vol. 1: The Fluid Pantheon* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2016), pp. 51-114.

¹² Grootaers, “The Hagiography of the Chinese God Chen-wu,” p. 163. See also Grootaers et al., “Rural Temples Around Hsuan-hua,” p. 57.

gate.¹³ In temples that are not dedicated to Zhenwu specifically, Zhenwu is always found among the attendants of the Jade Emperor. The table above which Zhenwu's portrait is hung or on which Zhenwu's statue is placed, called "Mount Wudang," is situated in front of the table of Zhang Daoling, with both tables flanking the main altar of the Jade Emperor. Interestingly, Zhenwu is also sometimes paired with a Southern Zhenwu (*nan zhenwu* 南真武), symbolizing the Southern Dipper. According to Grootaers, Southern Zhenwu differs iconographically from Zhenwu of the North in that his forehead sports a third eye, situated vertically in the middle of his brow.¹⁴ Grootaers further notes that temples dedicated to Southern Zhenwu are rare, as he is mostly found in Zhenwu temples.

It was the imperial patronage of Song, Yuan, and Ming emperors that transformed Zhenwu's reverence into a truly national cult. For the imperial courts of these dynasties, Zhenwu was a militant, protective god who was especially critical in defending the country from its enemies, particularly from the north. Subsequently, Zhenwu was worshiped enthusiastically by the military, especially among the troops stationed along the northern border. Chao argues that Zhenwu was promoted to the national stage after he was adopted by the Song military.¹⁵ Interestingly, around the same time, the Jurchens and Tanguts increasingly worshiped Zhenwu as well.¹⁶ In China, beyond imperial patronage and the army, as Chao notes, "it was the collaborative effort of the local elite and commoners under the initiative of the Daoist clergy that

¹³ See for instance chapter 10.

¹⁴ Grootaers, "Rural Temples Around Hsuan-hua," pp. 60-61. Grootaers also notes that the Southern Zhenwu is closely connected to Thunder Gods.

¹⁵ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 39.

is responsible for creating Zhenwu temples.”¹⁷ As temples for Zhenwu became widespread across China around the Northern Song Dynasty, Zhenwu worship was also brought into the houses of the laity. Zhenwu portraits, for instance, were in high demand among scholar-officials for the purpose of domestic veneration.¹⁸

Zhenwu’s cult continued to prosper under the Yuan, when he was also associated with the Tantric god Mahākāla, the celestial emperor of the dark heaven whom the Yuan adopted as imperial protector. Zhenwu’s Daoist title was officially recognized in 1304 by the Yuan emperor Chengzong 成宗, when Mount Wudang was officially regarded as Zhenwu’s cult center.¹⁹ The political significance of Zhenwu and his cult center on Mount Wudang carried on from the Yuan into the early decades of the Ming. The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, ordered his sons to offer sacrifices to Zhenwu at the northern gate of Nanjing when they visited.²⁰ Emperors Yongle and Shizong invested extensively in Wudang and further elevated Zhenwu worship as part of their struggle for political legitimacy.²¹ Under Yongle Emperor, who claimed to be a reincarnation of Zhenwu and therefore gave official sponsorship to his cult, the temples on Mount Wudang were rebuilt and expanded. The administration of Mount Wudang was given over to imperial eunuchs, demonstrating the importance of Wudang as a Daoist center.²² Ceremonies in his honor were conducted regularly at his temple in the Forbidden City, the

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 29-31, 38-40.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ De Bruyn, “Daoism in the Ming,” in Livia Kohn ed., *Daoism Handbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 599.

²¹ De Bruyn, “Le Wudangshan,” pp. 326-341.

²² De Bruyn, “Daoism in the Ming,” p. 599.

Qin'an dian 欽安殿 (“Hall of Imperial Peace”). Although Ming emperors did not embark on pilgrimages to Wudang themselves, they dispatched overseers and envoys to the mountain on a regular basis, and many imperial relatives traveled to Wudang in person.²³ Zhenwu's role as an imperial protector echoed in late-Ming commercial narrative writing; besides *Origin*, which will be further discussed in the next section, Zhenwu lends a hand in toppling the Shang and securing the rule of the Zhou dynasty in *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義.²⁴

The cult of Zhenwu reached its zenith during the Ming dynasty, when he not only enjoyed imperial patronage, but was widely worshiped in every level of Chinese society, including by military servicemen.²⁵ His popularity across the social spectrum is evidenced by the great number of extant images and sculpture (including inexpensive small-scale statues) dating from that period.²⁶ Another testament to the immense popularity of Zhenwu reverence at the time is the great number of temples dedicated to him across the empire that were constructed during the Ming.²⁷ On Mount Wudang, the number of Daoist practitioners surged from mid to late

²³ See De Bruyn, “Daoism in the Ming,” pp. 595-596. Ming princes were also avid followers of the Zhenwu cult and its center on Wudang. The Prince of Xiang, Zhu Bo 朱柏 (1371-1399), whose fiefdom was in Hubei Province, visited Mount Wudang and later significantly expanded a small Zhenwu temple in Jiangling 江陵 into a large monastery that served as a travel-temple for Zhenwu. In 1399, Zhu Bo himself assumed the role of Ritual Patron (*zhai zhu* 齋主) in the Great Universal Heavenly Offering rite, which lasted five days and nights. See Richard G. Wang, “Ming Princes and Daoist Ritual” (*T'oung Pao*, second series, vol. 95, 1/3, 2009), pp. 88-91.

²⁴ See Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, pp. 130-138. Zhenwu's hagiography in the *Soushen daquan* 搜神大全 likewise mentions his aid to the founder of the Zhou dynasty. Zhenwu also appears briefly in *Sansui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳, *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三寶太監西洋記通俗演義, *Yangjia jiang yanyi* 楊家將演義, *Xihu er ji* 西湖二集, *Yun he qi zong* 云合奇踪, and other works of the time.

²⁵ Wang, “Four Steles,” pp. 77-78. Wang discusses temples dedicated to Zhenwu in military bases, forts, and even city walls in the Lanzhou area.

²⁶ Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, p. 294.

²⁷ Xu Daoling's 許道齡 survey of Zhenwu temples in Beijing from the 1940's lists between 30-40 temples dated to the Yuan-Ming period, and Grootaers' survey from 1948 lists 169 temples in villages in Shanxi and Hebei most of which also date back to the Ming. See also Wang, “Four Steles,” p. 79.

Ming; from less than two thousand in 1489, their number reached over ten thousand in 1589.²⁸ During the Wanli period, Zhenwu's cult center on Mount Wudang was again expanded and refurbished by imperial commission.²⁹ When *Origin* was first published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Zhenwu was revered as a national god throughout the empire, and his cult center on Mount Wudang was a prominent tourist attraction and pilgrimage site.

Zhenwu's hagiography has played an important role in his reverence.³⁰ By the late Ming, textual hagiographies of Zhenwu appeared in great numbers in the Daoist canon, in gazetteers, and in popular narratives. Since the Song, many of Zhenwu's hagiographies were illustrated and sometimes coupled with maps, diagrams, and talismans. Pictorial hagiographies of Zhenwu were produced as lavish albums, printed for mass consumption, and adorned the walls of his temples.³¹ It is difficult to estimate how many mural portrayals of Zhenwu's life existed in late Ming, but the survey conducted by Grootaers et al. in northern China in the 1950's reveals that almost half of the Zhenwu temples in that area, most of which date back to the Ming, housed murals depicting Zhenwu's hagiography.³²

Furthermore, Zhenwu's life story came to be intimately linked to the history and landscape of Mount Wudang from an early stage of his mythmaking process. Zhenwu's

²⁸ De Bruyn, "Le Wudangshan," p. 346.

²⁹ Mei Li, *Mingqing shiqi wudangshan chaoshan jinxiang yanjiu*, p. 108. She quotes the literati Xu Xuemo, who visited the mountain during this period and described the frenzy of temple-construction and ongoing worship by hordes of pilgrims.

³⁰ See discussion in Gou Bo 苟波, *Daojiao yu Ming Qing wenxue* 道教与明清文学 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2010), pp. 106-111.

³¹ Two notable examples of pictorial hagiographies of Zhenwu include the canonical text *Da Ming Xuantian shangdi ruiying tulu* 大明玄天上帝瑞應圖錄 (DZ 959) and the Ming-era album *Zhenwu lingying tuce* 真武靈應圖冊. See Xiao Haiming 肖海明, *Zhenwu tuxiang yanjiu* 真武圖像研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2007).

³² Grootaers, "Rural Temples Around Hsuan-hua," pp. 60-61.

hagiography was recounted in accounts of Mount Wudang in travel diaries, poetry anthologies, geographic encyclopedias, and local gazetteers. It is safe to assume that the Wanli-era readers of *Origin* were already familiar to some degree with Zhenwu's life story and its ties to Mount Wudang and had most likely participated—or at least witnessed—cultic reverence of Zhenwu. What did reading this book mean to them? How did it shape their understanding of Mount Wudang and its place in the world? In a more general sense, what does it reveal about the dynamic between lore and worship on the one hand, and place and pilgrimage on the other? And finally, what can we learn from this dynamic about the function of hagiographic narrative writing within the larger cultural landscape of late-Ming China?

3. Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North

Following the Wanli-era vogue, the full title of this hagiographic narrative runs quite long and uses the terms “origin” (*chushen* 出身) and “narrative account” (*zhizhuan* 志傳). It reads: *The Account of the Origin of the Dark Emperor of the North, the Venerable Master Zhenwu* (*beifang Zhenwu zushi xuantian shangdi chushen zhizhuan* 北方真武祖師玄天上帝出身志傳). The book was published at the Shuangfeng tang 雙峰堂 publishing house in 1602 by Yu Xiangdou, who most likely had partially—if not entirely—written it.³³ The book is divided into twenty-four chapters (*hui*) in four volumes (*juan*), ending with an appendix consisting of a eulogy of Zhenwu and directions for his worship. The “picture-above-text” illustrations (*shangtu-xiawen* 上圖下文) run throughout the book, including the appendix.

³³ Liu Cunyan's work on *Origin* and similar Ming prints was instrumental in contextualizing them for the first time within late-Ming book culture context. See Liu Ts'un-yan (Cunyan), *Chinese Popular Fiction in Two London Libraries* (Hong Kong: Lung men bookstore, 1967), pp. 138-144; and “Siyouji de Ming keben” 四游记的明刻本, in Xu Rentu ed., *Siyouji* 四游记 (Taipei: Hele tushu chubanshe, 1980), pp. 407-437.

Before analyzing the main narrative, I would like to dwell first on the appendix, which covers the last six pages of *Origin* and forms a worship manual of Zhenwu. The first page lists the offerings one should sacrifice to Zhenwu (設供 *shegong*) and the type of foods that worshipers must avoid (忌食 *ji shi*). The next page lists taboo words and conduct that might offend the deity. Its opening section is titled “harming longevity” (*shoushang* 壽傷). It is followed by a longer list of prohibitions entitled “requirement for nourishing the sage” (*sheng yang zhi yao* 聖養之要), wherein each sentence begins with the enlarged character 勿, meaning “do not.” The page ends with a list of taboo words titled “taboos to guard against” (*yu hui* 御諱). The third page includes a timetable of Zhenwu’s descents to the human world (*sheng jiang zhi chen* 聖降之辰). Since sacrificing to Zhenwu on the days when he descends to the world and patrols the human realm (by organizing a ceremonial feast, *zhaijie* 齋戒) is regarded as especially beneficial, this timetable was invaluable to his worshipers. Chao notes that the “days that Zhenwu scheduled to descend from heaven punctuated the life rhythm of his devotees and formed a liturgical calendar for them.”³⁴ A eulogy for Zhenwu (titled *Xuandi shenghao quanwen* 玄帝聖號勸文) covers the last three pages of the appendix. This eulogy draws on a Yuan-era text included in the Daoist Canon, almost verbatim.³⁵

Although parts of the text are barely legible due to the state of the few surviving copies, the instructions for the worship of Zhenwu and his eulogy follow closely those included in the

³⁴ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 42-43. There are a few discrepancies between different liturgical texts of Zhenwu; Chao suggests that these inconsistencies might be due to geographical differences, or the result of “a negotiation on devotional practices between the institutional authority of the clergy and scriptures on the one hand and the laity’s autonomy legitimized by direct divine revelation on the other.”

³⁵ Wei Qi 衛琪, *Yuqing wuji zongzhen Wenchang dadongxian jingzhu* 玉清無極總真文昌大洞仙經註 (DZ 103).

Daoist canon and Ming-era gazetteers of Mount Wudang (for instance, the *Chi jian dayue taihe shan zhi* 敕建大岳太和山志).³⁶ The earliest extant hagiography of Zhenwu, a stone inscription from 1099 titled *Yuanshi tianzun shuo beifang Zhenwu jing* 元始天尊說北方真武經, includes a similar list of taboo foods, alongside accounts of people who achieved good fortune by following these directions correctly.³⁷ The canonical text *Xuantian shangdi qisheng lu* 玄天上帝啟聖錄 likewise echoes the directions included in the appendix.³⁸ It describes in detail how the sacrificial ritual to Zhenwu should be performed, stressing the prohibitions against animal sacrifice (even forbidding the use of ritual paraphernalia that was prepared with animal-based pigments or oils). Furthermore, it records the experiences of a specific worshiper who was advised to sacrifice to Zhenwu after failing the imperial examinations.³⁹

The appendix of *Origin* is an important feature of this book; not only does it shed light on the worship of Zhenwu among the laity in late Ming, but it also situates the narrative text – and similar contemporaneous origin narratives – within a ritual context. Since information on domestic worship of Zhenwu is scarce, these sacrificial lists and timetables open a rare window onto the reverence practices of the laity. The content and layout of the instructions in this appendix resemble *shanshu* literature of the time, much of which was produced through spirit

³⁶ See section 附: 列真, in “Chi jian dayue taihe shan zhi” 敕建大岳太和山志, *juan* 3, *Ming dai Wudang shan zhi* 明代武当山志 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1999) p. 82. This gazetteer was edited by Ren Ziyuan 任自垣 (fl. 1400-1422), who was the general intendent of Mount Wudang and head of all Wudang temples between 1413-1428, as well as one of the compilers of the Daoist canon. His preface carries the date 1432.

³⁷ In the Daoist canon, DZ 27. See also Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 40-41. Chao also discusses other forms of Zhenwu devotion among the laity since the Song Dynasty, such as congregational gatherings, veneration of Zhenwu icons and statues, and demand for portraits and effigies of Zhenwu.

³⁸ In the Daoist canon, DZ 958.

³⁹ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 39-40.

writing.⁴⁰ Moreover, it further underscores the different functions of this book and its usefulness to the lay reader as both a hagiographical account and a guidebook for the worship of Zhenwu.



Figures 18 and 19: a worship timetable and a list of offerings from the appendix of *Origin*

It is unclear how many times *Origin* was reprinted in late Ming while the Yu-family Shuangfeng tang house was in operation, since they could have used the same woodblocks for several printing-cycles. The few extant copies of the book suggest that there was more than one printing cycle during late Ming. The fact that the book was reprinted more than once before it was grouped together with the other *Journeys* attests to its commercial success as an independent product in late Ming (see below). Yet the quality of the printing of later editions (before the nineteenth century) gradually declined. After Yu Xiangdou’s 1602 edition, a new set of woodblocks, or a refurbishing of the old set, produced another version of the book, which follows the 1602 print very closely, but the quality of its carving is significantly inferior to Yu

⁴⁰ Seaman, “The Divine Authorship of the Pei-yu chi [Journey to the North]” (The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 45, No. 3, May, 1986), p. 492.

Xiangdou's first edition. This is particularly apparent in its crude illustrations, wherein figures often resemble nothing more than silhouettes, or paper-cut images. Its poor quality suggests that it was probably an inexpensive commodity, most likely intended for limited use, and definitely not a volume to be treasured for generations. This might also explain why so few copies have survived to this day.

After a two-hundred year hiatus, the book was republished as part of a collection of four narratives titled *Four Journeys* (*siyouji* 四遊記, *siyou quanzhuan* 四遊全傳, and *siyou hezhuan* 四游合傳), first in 1811 and again in 1830.⁴¹ These Qing-dynasty editions changed the format of the book by dropping the “picture-above-text” illustrations, which were no longer fashionable, changed its title to *Journey to the North* (*Beiyouji* 北遊記), and more importantly – excluded the abovementioned appendix. As I have argued in Chapter 1, the exclusion of the ritual appendix and the conjoining of *Origin* with three other narratives, now reframed as *youji* 遊記, pulled this hagiographical narrative farther away from its original religio-cultural context in late Ming. The de-contextualization and reframing of this book during the Qing set the tone for modern views of *Origin* and similar works of late Ming, views that ignore the full range of their usage as cultural commodities, including their religious functions.

What spurred the book's commercial success in late Ming? It certainly cannot be credited to its narrative. *Origin* is probably one of the most poorly written among its contemporaneous origin narratives. As Grootaers notes, it “cannot be said to be especially amusing, and it is not meant to be.”⁴² It is a hagiography masquerading as a *xiaoshuo*, but devoting far less effort to the

⁴¹ See *Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao* (1990), pp. 95-96.

⁴² Grootaers, “the Hagiography of the Chinese God Chen-wu,” p. 162.

task compared with other works available during these years (for instance Deng Zhimo's Trilogy). Yet it makes use of the same late-Ming pseudo-vernacular language and set phrases that characterize other *xiaoshuo* of the time. For instance, it begins each new chapter or storyline with the common "as the story goes" (卻說) and invokes the storyteller trope by concluding with the usual "if you wish to know what happens next, listen to the next chapter" (不知後來如何，且聽下回分解). However, the narrative includes only twelve short poems, among which only four are descriptive verse (that is, describing the setting, atmosphere, and characters). The book is also marked by the late-Ming tendency to list and enumerate, culminating in the list of Zhenwu's generals in Chapter 23, toward the end of the book.⁴³ Interestingly, it describes the appearance of characters in great detail only when they are deified – and their appearance solidifies as iconography.

As a hagiography of Zhenwu, *Origin* partially echoes previous accounts of Zhenwu's origin story in canonical texts, encyclopedias, narrative texts, and even pictorial hagiographies – some of which seem to have provided Yu Xiangdou with the source material for this book. It adopts the basic trajectory of the Zhenwu myth as it is told in preexisting texts and albums, with a few notable exceptions. The book portrays four incarnations of Zhenwu prior to his ascension, but only the last among these reincarnation stories follows previous hagiographies of Zhenwu, while the first three incarnations are new additions to his myth. Zhenwu's cultivation and attainment on Mount Wudang is also in keeping with previous hagiographies, as is the final episode that celebrates Wudang as his cult center. Nevertheless, the second half of the book, which depicts Zhenwu subjugating and enlisting his thirty-six generals one after the other, is a

⁴³ The tendency to list and enumerate also characterizes several other late-Ming works, including *Xiyouji* and *Fengshen yanyi*. See Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, pp. 62-64.

clear deviation from previous works. Still, its vocabulary and emphasis often betray its connections to its source material, including liturgical and ritual texts. Aside from the inner-alchemy jargon that accompanies the narrative, throughout *Origin Zhenwu* is referred to as the Venerable Teacher (*zushi* 祖師), following Thunder Rites liturgical manuals that rely on the master-disciple metaphor in explaining the relationship between Zhenwu and the Daoist priests.⁴⁴

One of the book's most interesting characteristics, which reduces its literary value at the same time as it highlights its value as a worship aid, is its repetitive and cyclical structure. It is, in fact, not *one* origin story, but numerous origin tales wrapped into one narrative. As mentioned above, instead of one miraculous pregnancy-birth-youth story, Zhenwu gets four. Moreover, in order to prove his mettle as a protective deity, Zhenwu defeats not one nemesis, but a horde of thirty-six demons in a series of exorcistic voyages.⁴⁵ A closer look at this narrative reveals a fractal structure whose attraction relies less on linear progression than on cyclical and repetitive storytelling. In this respect, it is more akin to collections of saints' hagiographies than to a fiction novel. The clichéd templates of saints' lives and the internal mirroring that characterizes the narrative as a whole represent an extreme example of middlebrow hagiographic writing that aims primarily at reverence and piety.

The general framework of the narrative follows the same cyclical trajectory of descent to the world and re-ascent to heaven as many of its contemporaneous origin narratives. The book commences with the descent of one of the three souls of the Jade Emperor into the human world

⁴⁴ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 67-69. Chao further notes that "the ancestral master was the patron saint and the source of ritual efficacy to those who were initiated into rituals administered by him." Ibid, p. 76.

⁴⁵ The number thirty-six is not coincidental; thirty-six is a typological number in Daoism in general and in the Zhenwu cult in particular. For example, there are thirty-six stanzas in the "divine incantation of the Northern Emperor" (included in the *Zhen 'gao*) for the exorcism of demons and a related set of thirty-six talismans; there are thirty-six small heavenly grottoes in Du Guangting's *Dongtian fudi*; and there are thirty-six cliffs on Mount Wudang.

and ends with the formal deification of Zhenwu and the establishment of his cult center on Mount Wudang. However, this basic trajectory is multiplied and repeated within the general framework several times, with Zhenwu's recurrent descents and ascents. Both thematically and structurally, the narrative can be divided into two main parts: the first nine chapters depict Zhenwu's human lives and his tortuous path to enlightenment, whereas the second part of the book (chapters 10-24) narrates Zhenwu's journeys in the human realm to fulfill his mission to subdue thirty-six demons, whom he enlists to his service. The two highpoints of the narrative are Zhenwu's attainment of the Way and his investiture as a god – both occurring on Mount Wudang (see sections 3 and 4).

This cyclical and repetitive structure is reminiscent of jāataka stories narrating the past lives of the Buddha, as well as the hundred-chapter *Xiyouji*.⁴⁶ This resemblance is not coincidental. Stories of the previous lives of the Buddha served as a central model for hagiographic writing in China since the first centuries AD, as I mentioned in Chapter 1. The *Xiyouji* ingeniously and ironically invoked this model; the cyclical structure of the band's demon-vanquishing journey in the hundred-chapter *Xiyouji* is, to a large extent, a parody of the very type of hagiographic storytelling that *Origin* belongs to. As we have seen in Chapter 1, this type of writing about the lives of revered cultural icons was widely popular in late Ming, albeit seldom attracting the interest (either praise or critique) of the literati.

Similarly to other contemporaneous origin narratives, *Origin* also devotes considerable attention to its protagonist's iconography and the establishment of his cult. Zhenwu's iconography is described and explained several times in the narrative, both by the narrator and by minor characters. Zhenwu's famously long, loose hair is explained in chapter 9, where it is said

⁴⁶ See Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, pp. 202-219.

that Zhenwu was combing his hair when he attained the Way and received the Jade Emperor's edict; afterward, when he tried to arrange his hair, he noticed that it would not move. The moment of attainment and divine recognition thus signals the solidification of his iconic image, hence his appearance could no longer be altered. Two detailed descriptions of Zhenwu's iconography follow in the next chapter, when the grateful fathers of the maidens Zhenwu rescued from the Turtle and Snake Demons discuss the construction of a temple in his honor by the northern gate, complete with a statue of Zhenwu. The narrative stresses that this temple, supposedly the first Zhenwu temple, is still active at the time of writing. Further endorsement of his cult is given in chapter 13, which depicts an old man who fasts (*zhai* 齋), as part of a local tradition, on the birthday of Zhenwu (the third day of the third month) to honor his attainment on Mount Wudang and request good fortune. Since the old man not only encounters Zhenwu but also received his divine assistance, this episode emphasizes the efficacy of Zhenwu worship. Toward the end of the narrative, chapter 23 provides a summary of Zhenwu's "portfolio" as a god: the full official title he received from the Jade Emperor,⁴⁷ the dates on which Zhenwu and his generals descend annually to the human world for inspection tours,⁴⁸ and a full list of his thirty-six generals.⁴⁹

It is worth mentioning that Zhenwu appears briefly in several other late-Ming narratives, including the hagiographical *Origin Story of Huaguang (Wuxian lingguan dadi Huguang wang zhuan* 五顯靈官大帝華光天王傳, also published by Yu Xiangdou), as well as non-hagiographic

⁴⁷混元九天萬法教主玉虛師相玄天上帝 蕩魔天尊.

⁴⁸上管三十六員天將，每年十二月二十五日，與眾將同游下界，巡察善惡.

⁴⁹ Curiously, some of the generals on this list differ from those depicted in the narrative. This might have been an editing error, or the result of a rushed composition process that relied on several different sources.

works, such as *Sansui pingyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳, *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji tongsu yanyi* 三寶太監西洋記通俗演義, *Yangjia jiang yanyi* 楊家將演義, *Xihu er ji* 西湖二集, *Yun he qi zong* 雲合奇踪, and others. Unfortunately, we have very few comments by readers describing their reading experience that shed light on how Zhenwu was perceived by the target audience of these works. One exception is the *biji* anthology *Wuzazu* 五雜組, published in 1616, which alludes to Zhenwu's role in subduing the recalcitrant Huaguang in the *Origin Story of Huaguang*. The common view, according to this text, is that Zhenwu, who represents the water phase, balances the fire phase embodied by Huaguang.⁵⁰

The dyad of water and fire as mutually-destructive yet co-dependent forces runs throughout *Origin* and plays an important role in the reverence of both Zhenwu and Huaguang. In chapter 15, Zhenwu is called to heaven to subjugate Huaguang and stop the fire that he caused in the Heavenly Palace. A fierce battle naturally ensues, in which Zhenwu uses several magical implements made of water, such as a Falling Water Rod (*jiang shui gun* 降水棍) and a Water Pill (*shui zhu li* 水珠粒), to defeat the fiery Huaguang. Instead of vanquishing him, however, Zhenwu enlists him into his service and sends him down to the human realm, where he is charged with defending the south, mirroring Zhenwu's role as defender of the north.

Despite this division of labor, the dyad of water and fire remains a key characteristic of Zhenwu. His iconic emblems – the tortoise and snake – symbolize the duality of water and fire, respectively. In the narrative, the Turtle and Snake Demons reside in the “water and fire cave”

⁵⁰ Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛, *Wuzazu* 五雜組, *juan* 15, p. 263 in *Zhongguo ji ben gu ji ku* 中國基本古籍庫, Erudition Database. This notion might have inspired the grouping these and two other narratives under the title *Four Journeys* in the nineteenth century. The *Wuzazu* also alludes elsewhere to Zhenwu as representing the north within the system of the four directions, together with the Red Sparrow of the south (*zhuqiao* 朱雀), the White Tiger (*baihu* 白虎) of the west, and the Blue Dragon (*qinglong* 青龍) of the east. See *Wuzazu* 五雜組, *juan* 15, p. 256.

(*shuihou dong* 水火洞) and are referred to as the Water and Fire Generals (*shuihuo er jian* 水火二將). Since they originate within the body of Zhenwu himself and he commands them, water and fire are intrinsically a part of Zhenwu; he not only symbolizes the water phase, but is repeatedly tasked with maintaining the balance between these two vital-yet-destructive forces. It is thus no surprise that water and fire are also used multiple times in the narrative to defeat a variety of demons, including illicit thunder deities. In this context, the water-fire dyad clearly evokes inner alchemy (*neidan* 內丹). As Lagerwey notes, “the Zhenwu myth is best read as a poetic description of Daoist internal alchemy.”⁵¹ Zhenwu’s repetitive victories against the dark forces by means of balancing water and fire serve here as allegories of inner alchemy practices.

Lastly, I would like to address briefly the arguments Seaman raised concerning a possible connection between *Origin* and the practice of spirit-writing (*fuji* 扶乩 or *fuluan* 扶鸞).⁵² The cult of Zhenwu was associated with practices of medium possession and spirit writing already during the Song dynasty. For instance, a commentary by Chen Zhong 陳忞 (written sometime after 1197) to a text titled *Taishang shuo xuantian dasheng zhenwu benzhuang shenzhou miao jing* 太上說玄天大聖真武本傳神咒妙經 (HY 753) affirms its origin as a product of spirit writing. Seaman points out that the endorsements of Zhenwu’s cult and the urgings to produce more copies of *Origin* in the book’s appendix characterize religious tracts of medium cults.⁵³ Seaman also highlights the connections between spirit-writing and the *youji* genre in modern works (like the *Diyu you-ji* 地獄遊記 and *Tiantang you-ji* 天堂遊記) and translations of *Origin*, which he

⁵¹ John Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang shan,” p. 324.

⁵² Gary Seaman, *Journey to the North*, pp. 12-39; Seaman, “The Divine Authorship of Pei-yu chi [Journey to the North],” pp. 483-497.

⁵³ Seaman, *Journey to the North*, 20-21.

regards as a cosmographic spiritual conquest of the north. Nevertheless, *Origin* itself provides little evidence to sustain the conjecture that it was composed through spirit-writing. Without conclusive internal or external evidence supporting the argument that the novel was composed through spirit writing, it would be more productive, in my opinion, to contemplate the cultural and ritualistic contexts that furnished the production and consumption of this work, and hence hold the key to understanding its significance around the turn of the seventeenth century.

4. Into the Wild: Mountains in Zhenwu's Origin Story

Origin is a tale of constant travel. The narrative transports us to the farthest reaches of the cosmos, from celestial halls in the divine realm to demonic dens in the wilderness, from the heart of the Chinese world to the edges of the universe. We follow Zhenwu to twenty-two mountains, ten caves, four countries, nine provinces, various towns and villages, as well as numerous architectural sites – temples, bridges, and monuments.

Zhenwu's four incarnations in the first half of the narrative place him in locales that are either foreign, such as the Xixia Kingdom 西霞國, or mythological, like the Gege 哥閣國 and Jingluo 淨洛國 kingdoms.⁵⁴ While the foreign roots of Zhenwu's previous incarnations sit well with the general depiction of Zhenwu throughout the narrative as an aloof outsider who is never truly at home in human society, they might also be related to the history of his cultic worship. The popularity of Zhenwu reverence along the northern Chinese border from the Song to the

⁵⁴ The names of these countries suggest that they were either transliterated or invented. Gege guo might be read as "whatever country." Jingluo guo received a variety of different spellings in Zhenwu's hagiographies, including 靜樂國 and 淨樂之國 in the *Wudang fudi zongzhenji*. Grootaers consulted an edition of *Origin* which mentions a kingdom called Sheguo 閻國 whose enemy is the "Mohammedan kingdom of western barbarians." See Grootaers, "The Hagiography of the Chinese God Chen-wu," pp. 151-152.

Ming, especially among soldiers, might have contributed to Zhenwu's association with the lands and peoples beyond the boundaries of the Chinese world. Moreover, according to Stephen Little, "two of the earliest surviving images of Zhenwu as an anthropomorphic warrior come from Xixia archeological context:" a 12th century banner depicting Zhenwu with a tortoise and snake, and a 12th century banner excavated from a Buddhist pagoda in Ningxia Autonomous Region.⁵⁵

Zhenwu's exorcistic journeys in the latter half of the narrative center on secluded mountains. The wilderness of the mountain is home to beasts, ascetics, immortals, deities, fiends, and monsters, distinguishing between whom often proves a challenge. The thirty-six demons whom Zhenwu defeats and enlists to his army all reside in the depths of some mountain, either real or imaginary. The narrative portrays mountains as potent loci, brimming with spiritual potential, offering the perfect place for self-cultivation, either for attaining the Way or to augment one's illicit power.⁵⁶ The mountain is regarded as a liminal space that serves as nexus between the human, the demonic, and the divine. Daoist sources since the first centuries AD ruminated on the dual nature of mountains as numinous sites for meeting immortals and conducting self-cultivation, as well as dangerous terrain harboring malevolent beasts and goblins.⁵⁷ The Daoist notion of "entering the mountain" (*rushan* 入山) addresses this duality by prescribing various types of recipes, talismans, and charts to protect travelers against the dangers

⁵⁵ Stephen Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), p. 219. Centuries earlier, already in the Eastern Han, the tortoise was painted on army banners (along with the vermilion bird, azure dragon, and white tiger) in organization of military unit. See Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁶ Thomas H. Hahn, "The Standard Taoist Mountain and Related Features of Religious Geography" (*Cahiers d'Extrême Asie*, vol. 4, 1988), pp. 147-155; Shih-shan Susan Huang, *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), pp. 105-111.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

lurking in mountains, while allowing them to tap their spiritual potential.⁵⁸ The ambivalent view of mountains as both potent and dangerous is mirrored in the ambivalent figure of Zhenwu and his army of converted demons.⁵⁹ As a fierce warrior-god who commands an army of demons in his descents to earth, Zhenwu himself is a liminal figure, residing both in the celestial realm and in the human world, yet invariably tied to the demonic – through his association with a specific mountain, Mount Wudang.

The transformation of the landscape is a recurring motif in *Origin*. Time and again, Zhenwu and his generals use their otherworldly powers, particularly those of self-transformation, to change the natural formation of the land or its man-made features in order to subjugate demons. In chapter 11, for instance, the Snake General transforms himself into a mountain while Zhenwu transforms his sword into a temple in order to capture the Black Demon (*hei shashen* 黑煞神, also known as Zhao Gongming 趙公明). Transforming the landscape goes hand in hand in *Origin* with the purification and reordering of the world. Every time Zhenwu subdues a demon, an edict is handed down from the court of the Jade Emperor bestowing a title and a position on the newly-reformed demon. It is, in other words, exorcism by conversion, subjugation by bureaucratization. The transformation of the landscape is thus intimately connected with Zhenwu

⁵⁸ Ibid. Huang notes that the Song encyclopedia *Taiping yulan* mentions a text titled the *Classic of Entering the Mountain* (*rushan jing* 入山經) “as a special Daoist handbook prepared for those who plan to embark on a journey to the mountains.” See Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, p. 375, n. 16.

⁵⁹ This ambivalence is also reflected in the names of the demons-cum-generals. Before they are subjugated by Zhenwu, they have a human-like name (with a surname 姓 and a personal name 名) and are referred to interchangeably as “sprites” (*yao* 妖) and “gods” (*shen* 神). Some of them were originally insentient beings that became animated due to their proximity to a source of spiritual potency. An important example is Huaguang 華光, who was originally a pile of lamps and flowers laid before the Buddha of the Future (如來面前燈花堆積), which came alive after hearing the Buddhist teachings. Another interesting example is a set of pen and notebook that became animated after being used by a powerful Daoist in chapter 17 of the *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*.

and his path to attainment; it is the process of *becoming* the god Zhenwu that recreates the world – both physically (altering the landscape) and spiritually (by purifying it of demonic pollution).

Mount Wudang plays a special role in the narrative, in accordance with its centrality to the Zhenwu cult. Lagerwey described the book as “a virtual guidebook to Wu-tang Shan,” whose reading may have influenced the experience of pilgrims to Wudang since late Ming.⁶⁰ Moreover, he writes that *Origin* “provided both an incentive to pilgrimage and a key to the pilgrim’s experience of the mountain.”⁶¹ In this sense, *Origin* is a topo-creative text, to borrow Martyn Smith’s term; it belongs to a group of texts that “disseminate the important narratives that adhere to places.”⁶²

Mount Wudang serves as setting for the two most important turning points in Zhenwu’s life story: his attainment of the Way (chapter 9), and the establishment of his cult center with the support of imperial patronage (chapter 24). These chapters in Zhenwu’s life furthermore signify transitions between the narrative blocks that compose the book: chapter 9 signifies the transition from the first half (Zhenwu’s incarnations and asceticism) to the second part (his exorcistic journeys), whereas chapter 24 marks the completion of Zhenwu’s origin story. *Origin* follows previous hagiographies of Zhenwu in stating that he spent altogether forty-two years of self-

⁶⁰ Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang shan,” p. 315.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁶² Martyn Smith, *Religion, Culture, and Sacred Space* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2008), p. 15. Smith distinguishes between topo-creative texts that “make” a place by propagating a dominant narrative, and topo-reflective texts that build up on that cultural baggage by recording the experiences of individuals who visited that place and ruminated about its dominant narrative. He defines topo-reflective texts as “travels narratives or other cultural products that provide a window on how culturally knowledgeable individuals experienced their world.” Yet unlike topo-creative texts, topo-reflective texts do not shape the cultural narrative that determines how people regard a certain place. In premodern China, however, the lines separating topo-creative and topo-reflective texts are not stable; for instance, a travelogue or a poem by literati who visited a certain place may be first labeled topo-reflective, but if it accrues cultural significance and influence over time, it might become a topo-creative text, in the sense that it shapes people’s understanding and appreciation of a place.

cultivation on Mount Wudang. Similarly to other contemporaneous origin narratives, *Origin* does not describe in detail the rituals, practices, and methods of cultivation that Zhenwu employs as part of his ascetic life on Wudang that eventually grant him enlightenment (they are only referred to generally as *jinglian xiuxing* 靜煉修行). We witness Zhenwu's spiritual quest, his dedication and his struggles, not through his own eyes, but from the perspective of other characters. It is through the eyes of Zhenwu's (as the prince of Jingle Kingdom) royal family and ministers that we learn of his unwavering dedication to ascetic cultivation on Wudang. Later on, we observe Zhenwu's misgivings and self-doubt through the eyes of the Mother Goddess of Mount Wudang (*Wudang shan shengmu* 武當山聖母).

Mount Wudang serves as both the obstacle that Zhenwu must overcome and his best aid on the path to attainment. A key example of this dual role of the mountain is the episode of the Mother Goddess of Mount Wudang, who first tests Zhenwu's resolution and then offers him guidance. As the story goes, after twenty years of strict ascetic cultivation, the Mother Goddess of Mount Wudang decides to test Zhenwu's devotion to the Way by seducing him. Her motivation for this test is not entirely pure; she muses that if Zhenwu succumbs to desire and fornicates with her, her divine powers would increase greatly (我神通廣大) due to his accumulated merit. Shapeshifting into a beautiful woman, the goddess approaches Zhenwu, begging for his assistance, crying that without his loving embrace she will surely die. Nevertheless, to her dismay, the test resulted in an unexpected problem: although Zhenwu does not give in to lust, he is profoundly troubled by this confrontation and decides to leave the mountain and look for another path of spiritual cultivation. Suddenly, the goddess is flooded with horror and guilt; she might be held responsible for preventing Zhenwu from reaching his predestined enlightenment! Something must be done to prevent this catastrophe. Therefore, the

goddess transforms herself into an old woman and plants herself further down the road. Zhenwu sees the old woman grinding a huge iron pole against a rock; she had promised an embroidery needle to her granddaughter, she informs him. Bewildered by this sisyphian logic but without grasping this metaphor for self-cultivation, Zhenwu continues his descent from the mountain. The goddess changes again, this time into an old man, chiseling at a cliff with an iron pestle and awl in an attempt to open a spring in the mountainside to irrigate his fields. To Zhenwu's doubting words, the old man replies that "when the mind is as firm as stone, why worry about not succeeding?" (心堅石也穿。何愁不成?). Zhenwu then realizes his mistake and turns back to continue his self-cultivation on Mount Wudang.

The trials Zhenwu undergoes on Mount Wudang and his encounter with the Mother Goddess draw on preexisting sources that tie the life of Zhenwu with the history of the mountain. Several texts from the Daoist canon expound on this event and its significance as a metaphor for self-cultivation, including the *Xuantian shangdi qisheng lu* 玄天上帝啟聖錄 and the *Wudang fudi zongzhen ji* 武当福地總真集, which refers to this story several times in relation to different sites that commemorate these events on the mountain, most notably the Grinding Needle Stone (*mozhen shi* 磨針石) and Grinding Stone Brook (*mozhen jian* 磨針澗). Also notable is the Yuan-era *Wudang jisheng ji* 武當紀勝集, by Luo Tingzhen 羅霆震, a poetic exploration of the mountain which depicts in verse the scenery and sites along one of the two most common pilgrimage routes in Wudang.⁶³ It devotes several poems to the abovementioned encounters

⁶³ See Luo Tingzhen 羅霆震, *Wudang jisheng ji* 武當紀勝集 (DZ 963). The work consists of 209 poems about Wudang and its surrounding area, making it the most extensive verse collection on Wudang. It was widely known in the following centuries; after its canonization in the Daoist canon, many of its poems were quoted by literati and incorporated into local gazetteers. Other literati who composed a substantial number of poems about Wudang include Wang Shizhen (100), Fang Hao (31), Zhang Huan (26), Gong Bingde (17), Sun Ying'ao (14), Yuan Hongdao (13), among others. See Yang Shiquan 楊世泉, "Wudang shige wenxianshu lue zhi yi: 'Wudang jishengji'" 武当詩歌文獻述略之一: "武當紀勝集" in Yang Lizhi 楊立志 ed., *Ziran, lishi, daojiao: Wudangshan*

between Zhenwu and the Goddess, at the very sites where they are said to have taken place along that pilgrimage path.

瘧劍塚

有誰出岫片雲孤，
花月為妖媚半途。
雷斧暗藏黃壤酒，
邪精褫魄死鄧都。

Spasm Sword Mound

Who is the one emerging from the cave, a sole cloud,
Midway, flowers and moon become a seductive fiend.
Thunder hatchet conceals the wine of yellow soil,
The demon strips its already-dead mortal soul.

磨針澗

淬礪功多粗者精，
聖師邀請上天京。
我心匪石堅於石，
小器成時大道成。

Grinding Needle Stream⁶⁴

The water-dipped sandstone achieves the essence of the vulgar,
The holy master is invited to the celestial capital.
My heart is not stone (but) it is hard as stone,
When a small vessel is made, the Great Way is complete.⁶⁵

Contemporaneous works also refer to this story, particularly in toponymical explanations of sites names on Wudang. The *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會 (1607; discussed in the next section) mentions a temple called Returning to the Real (*fuzhen guan* 復真觀) and a pool called Mother Goddess Tears Pool (*shengmu dilei chi* 聖母滴淚池), both commemorating this story. The *Hainei qiguan* 海內奇觀 (1609; likewise discussed in the next section) mentions a shrine for the old woman (*laolao ci* 老姥祠) located near the abovementioned Grinding Needle Brook (*mozhen*

yanjiu lunwen ji 自然，历史，道教：武当山研究论文集 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006), pp. 595-604.

⁶⁴ This poem also appears verbatim in the *Xuantian shangdi qisheng lu* 玄天上帝啟聖錄 (DZ 958), where it is attributed to the immortal Lei Mailu 雷買麓仙人.

⁶⁵ Luo Tingzhen 罗霆震, *Wudang jisheng ji* 武當紀勝集 (DZ 963).

jian 磨針澗).⁶⁶ I could not find any mention of Zhenwu's encounter with the old man in canonical texts or in late-Ming compendia; it might be an original addition of this narrative text.

The clearest and most ardent endorsement of the Zhenwu cult and its center on Wudang in *Origin* is given in the final chapter of the book, chapter 24, which depicts the growth of his popular worship and the imperial patronage of his temple on Mount Wudang during the Yongle reign. Here Wudang is portrayed as the center of Zhenwu's divine power (*ling* 靈). Whenever he descends into the human world to offer his assistance, it is to Wudang that he first arrives: "with his true form he leaves the upper realm, directly entering Wudang to save the people."⁶⁷ The narrative furthermore traces the origins of the popular reverence of Zhenwu to Wudang; it argues that it was at the foot of the mountain that the first Zhenwu temple was erected.

Interestingly, not only was the first Zhenwu temple built in Wudang according to this narrative, but its construction was in recognition of Zhenwu's divine protection and assistance specifically to *travelers* of all kinds: "Officials, travelers, and merchants often received his aid; they modeled a statue after the Venerable Master at the foot of Mount Wudang and erected a temple there to offer sacrifices to him."⁶⁸ Moreover, the people built temples to honor Zhenwu along the banks of rivers, to thank him for his protection of journeymen: "when officials and commoners journeyed on the river by boat, Zhenwu would often manifest himself and save them, each and every one; reaching the river bank, they would enter the temple to offer incense, whose

⁶⁶ The *Hainei qiguan* abound with similar depictions of Wudang sites whose names relate to episodes in Zhenwu's hagiography. See discussion of this text in section IV.

⁶⁷真身離了上界，直入武當救民。

⁶⁸官員客商，常常得救，塑祖師一個神像於武當山下，立一廟宇供養。

smoke continues to this day.”⁶⁹ Thus, the final chapter ties travel and Wudang firmly to the Zhenwu lore.

The last chapter of *Origin* also praises the imperial patronage of Zhenwu and his Wudang cult center during the Yongle reign, which historically indeed saw the greatest imperial investment in construction and expansion of the mountain’s temples. The narrative tells that after defeating the “yellow-haired Tartars” (黃毛韃子), Emperor Yongle wished to thank the god who aided in the victory, though he did not know who he was. The emperor provides us with a full description of Zhenwu’s iconography: “his long hair laid down, carrying a sword, with a white face and long beard, accompanied by thirty-six celestial generals, among them a turtle and a snake by his side.”⁷⁰ Once the emperor learns that the god is Zhenwu, he is determined to personally embark on a pilgrimage to Zhenwu’s temple in Wudang to offer sacrifices.⁷¹ Upon arrival, the emperor is pleasantly surprised to discover that Zhenwu’s features are identical to his own. The chapter goes on to describe the construction of new temples, commissioning of statues and images of Zhenwu, and allocation of funds to sustain the cult center, ending with the miraculous appearance of a great bronze bell. The narrative finally concludes with a paragraph listing the benefits from Zhenwu worship and extolling his divine powers, thanks to which the world is now at peace (天下太平).

Zhenwu’s connection to Mount Wudang is also reiterated in late-Ming narrative texts other than *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*. One important example is *Xiyouji*, where in

⁶⁹凡有官員人民行船過江，祖師常常現身救護，各各得救，到江邊過者，俱入廟中行香，香火不息。

⁷⁰披髮仗劍，白臉長鬚，帶有三十六員天將，內有龜蛇等相隨。

⁷¹ Despite the emperor’s significant contribution to Zhenwu’s cult center on Mount Wudang, there is no historical evidence to support this notion that Yongle personally traveled to Wudang.

chapter 66 Sun Wukong flies to Mount Wudang in order to solicit the help of Zhenwu in vanquishing demons. The chapter opens with a poem exalting the beauty of Wudang, and another depicting Zhenwu as a saintly ascetic and fierce commander of demons, who attained enlightenment and ascended to heaven from Mount Wudang.

5. Mount Wudang

The association of Zhenwu with Mount Wudang has been shaping the cultural, religious, and spatial perception of the mountain range since the Song Dynasty at the latest. Wudang is somewhat of an exception among China's sacred mountains in its overwhelming focus on a single tradition. As Lagerwey notes, Wudang is "a mountain whose every shrine and every scene has been integrated into the dramatic tale of a single god, a god whose Taoist identity is incontrovertible and whose imperial connections are impeccable."⁷² In the course of the centuries, the reciprocal relationship between the god and the mountain contributed to the popularity of both.⁷³

The Wudang mountain range is located in northwestern Hubei Province, not far from the Han River. Wudang was regarded as a place of spiritual significance since the first centuries AD. The Buddhist presence on the mountain can be traced back to the third century AD. Although Buddhist monasteries and activities on Wudang somewhat declined after the Tang, they persisted

⁷² Lagerwey, "The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang Shan," p. 322. By contrast, James Robson describes competing traditions and layering of narratives that characterize other sacred mountains, such as Nanyue. See Robson, *Power of Place: the religious landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue) in medieval China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

⁷³ Robson notes that "there is a circular relationship between special people and special places." See Robson, pp. 22-25.

in the late Ming and were recorded by literati travelers such as Wang Shizhen.⁷⁴ Daoist hermits resided on Wudang since the Six Dynasties period at the latest.⁷⁵ It was associated with numerous historical and fictional Daoists hermits, including Lü Dongbin and Zhang Sanfeng 張三豐.⁷⁶ Du Guangting included Wudang in his list of seventy-two “auspicious places” (七十二福地). The Song dynasty represents a watershed in the history of Wudang, when it was first recognized officially as a Daoist center. At this time, worship of Zhenwu became closely associated with loyalty and devotion to the state, as Zhenwu became the dynasty’s guardian deity. By the Yuan, the mountain sported nine palaces (*gong* 宮), eight Daoist monasteries (*guan* 觀), and numerous temples (*miao* 廟), altars (*tan* 壇), pavilions (*ting* 亭), terraces (*tai* 台), and bridges (*qiao* 橋). It was during the Yuan that the mountain was bestowed the title “blessed land,” *Wudang fudi* 武當福地.⁷⁷ While the Yuan court already accepted Wudang’s status as a “blessed land” and one of the five great peaks, it was the early Ming imperial patronage that

⁷⁴ Mei Li, *Ming Qing shiqi Wudangshan chaoshan jinxiang yanjiu*, pp. 128-129.

⁷⁵ Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang Shan,” p. 296.

⁷⁶ Zhang Sanfeng practiced inner alchemy in Wudang and was associated with Quanzhen centers on the mountain during the early years of the Ming Dynasty. Ming sources describe his apparitions on Mount Wudang, highlighting the importance of theophany to the lore of sacred mountains; one of the attraction of traveling on the mountain was the possibility of encountering one of its famous immortals. Around the same period of the Yongle reign that saw the transformation of Wudang under imperial patronage, four imperial envoys were sent to Wudang to search for Zhang Sanfeng. Anna Seidel notes that these envoys might have been motivated not only by a desire to find the immortal but also by political reasons: first, to legitimize the rule of Yongle by receiving the immortal’s spiritual support, and second, to search the previous (removed) emperor Jianwen, a possible threat to the legitimacy of the usurper Yongle. See Anna Seidel, “A Taoist Immortal of the Ming Dynasty: Chang San-feng,” in de Bary ed., *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 485-494. See also Huang Zhaohan 黃兆漢, *Mingdai daoshi Zhang Sanfeng kao* 明代道士張三豐考 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1988).

⁷⁷ See Sha Mingshou 沙銘壽, *Dongtian Fudi: Daojiao gong guan shengjing* 洞天福地：道教宮觀勝境 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubansh, 1994), p. 151.

elevated Wudang over other mountains, ranking first among the world's famous mountains (天下第一名山).⁷⁸

By the mid-fifteenth century, Mount Wudang was a bustling worship site of Zhenwu, enjoying imperial patronage. Although the founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, aimed to restrict organized religions, both he and his descendants were influenced by Daoists and favored the religious institutions operating on Mount Wudang. Under the Yongle emperor, the Daoists on Mount Wudang had direct contact with the emperor, accessing him through imperial eunuchs rather than more formal channels.⁷⁹ Since Emperor Yongle attributed his political and military success to the assistance of Zhenwu, he elevated Mount Wudang to the status of a prominent cult center and granted it imperially recognized status. Moreover, Yongle Emperor echoed previous dedications by Yuan emperors by elevating the status of Mount Wudang above that of the traditional Five Sacred Peaks.⁸⁰ During the Yongle reign, in 1417, Mount Wudang received the title Great Peak, and in 1552, during the Jiajing reign, it also received the title Dark Peak Ruling the World (*zhishi xuanyue* 治世玄岳).⁸¹

Wudang became a vibrant religious center, attracting Daoist clergy from all schools at the time.⁸² The most dominant Daoist movement on Mount Wudang in late Ming was the Zhengyi sect, while six different schools of the Quanzhen sect co-existed on the mountain, most

⁷⁸ Wang Guangde 王光德 and Yang Lizhi 杨立志. *Wudang daojiao shilue* 武当道教史略 (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 1993), pp. 214-215.

⁷⁹ See de Bruyn, "Daoism in the Ming," p. 594-596.

⁸⁰ De Bruyn, "Daoism in the Ming," pp. 596-598; Seaman, *Journey to the North*, pp. 25-27.

⁸¹ Sha Mingshou, *Dongtian Fudi*, p. 151.

⁸² See Wang Guangde and Yang Lizhi, *Wudang daojiao shilue*, pp. 215-227.

prominent among them was the Longmen School.⁸³ The majority of Daoist clergy on Mount Wudang came from other provinces, primarily from Jiangnan.⁸⁴ The late Ming saw a particular spike in commemoration of Daoist rituals in Wudang, especially during the Wanli period. Buddhist presence on the mountain persisted as well, attracting itinerant Buddhist monks.⁸⁵ Among the Daoists associated with Mount Wudang were numerous literati and masters influenced by Buddhist thought. It is unclear at what time and in what manner Mount Wudang became identified with the tradition of Taiji quan 太極拳, and came to be known as “the Taoist counterpart and rival of the Buddhist Shao-lin.”⁸⁶ In time, Zhenwu also became associated with the martial arts traditions of Wudang, with certain movements and weapons named after him and his turtle and snake emblems.⁸⁷ Significantly, the religious vibrancy of Wudang during the Ming had widespread impact on popular culture, cultic reverence, construction of temples, and *jinxiang* 進香 practices across the entire empire.⁸⁸

Late-imperial writings about the mountain cover an extensive array of genres, including poetry (*shi* 詩, *ge* 歌, *fu* 賦), inscriptions (*beiming* 碑銘), travelogues (*youji* 游記), and essays (*xuwen* 序文, *shu* 疏, *jiwen* 祭文). Some of the most distinguished literati-travelers of late Ming,

⁸³ Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang shan,” pp. 302-303. Zhengyi Daoism disappeared from Wudang by the middle of the Qing Dynasty, though it continued to exist in the nearby countryside. For a more detailed overview of the four major sects on the mountain see Tan Dajiang 譚大江, “Qian tan Wudang daopai jiqi xiulian shu” 浅谈武当道派及其修炼术 in *Ziran, lishi, daojiao*, pp. 67-89. Tan devotes particular attention to the Yinxiu sect 隱修派, Quanzhen sect 全真派, Zhengyi sect 正一派, and Zonghe sect 综合派.

⁸⁴ Mei Li, *Mingqing shiqi wudangshan chaoshan jinxiang yanjiu*, pp. 125-126.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

⁸⁶ Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang shan,” p. 303.

⁸⁷ Gan Yizhen 甘毅臻, “Lun Wudang wushu zhong de Xuanwu” 论武当武术中的玄武, in *Ziran, lishi, daojiao*, pp. 693-697.

⁸⁸ Wang Guangde and Yang Lizhi, *Wudang daojiao shilue*, pp. 216-219.

such as Wang Shizhen 王世貞 and Xu Xiake 徐霞客, visited Wudang and dedicated poems and essays to the mountain.⁸⁹ Scholars estimate that the number of literary works about Wudang from the Ming Dynasty exceeds a thousand.⁹⁰ This diverse spectrum is visible in Wudang gazetteers, which included numerous literary pieces celebrating the mountain. The materials included in late Ming gazetteers of Wudang and their arrangement thus reflect the compilers' perception of the significance of the mountain to their readers, as well as their hierarchy of knowledge - what was worth writing about and in what fashion was culturally predetermined. In gazetteers, Bingenheimer notes, "geographic description cannot be purely descriptive, nor history merely historical. Buddhist and Daoist temple gazetteers must tie their sites into their respective religious *imaginaires* by documenting their religious meanings."⁹¹

The association of Zhenwu with Mount Wudang is often used to explain the mountain's name. In a preface to the canonical *Wudang fudi zong zhen ji* 武當福地總真集, the author Liu Daoming 劉道明 writes that "after the Dark Emperor's [Zhenwu] ascension, it was said that no other than the Dark Warrior [Zhenwu] could manage it, thus they named it so."⁹² A similar

⁸⁹ See Xu Xiake, "You Taiheshan riji" 遊太和山日記 in Xu Xiake youji xuanping 徐霞客游记选评 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), pp. 90-98. See also Mei Li, *Mingqing shiqi wudangshan chaoshan jinxiang yanjiu*, pp. 118-119.

⁹⁰ Wang Guangde and Yang Lizhi, *Wudang daojiao shilue*, p. 222. They divide Ming writings about Wudang into three periods: early (1368-1435), middle (1436-1582), and late (1583-1644).

⁹¹ Marcus Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin: Mount Putuo and its Gazetteers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 8.

⁹² 玄帝升真之後，故曰：非玄武不足以當之，因名焉。See Liu Daoming, *Wudang fudi zongzhenji* (DZ 962). The text was compiled in 1291. It provides a rather comprehensive guide to the mountain's important sites and describes its natural formations. The first *juan* describes seventy-two peaks (*feng*) in the Wudang range; the second *juan* explores its thirty-six cliffs (*yan*) and twenty-four rivers (*jian*), as well as terraces (*tai*), ponds (*chi*), pools (*tan*), and caves (*dong*), rocks (*shi*), temples (gong and guan), flora and fauna. The third and final *juan* includes eulogies and hagiographical sketches of Zhenwu, quoting numerous other sources. The author of this text, Liu Daoming, was a Ritual Master and a native of the Wudang region. He was also a disciple of the master Huang Shunshen 黃舜申, codifier of the Thunder Rites. The *Wudang fudi zong zhen ji* draws heavily on another work included in the Daoist canon: a pictorial hagiography of Zhenwu titled *Daming Xuantian shangdi ruiying tulu* 大明玄天上帝瑞應圖錄 (DZ 959), which includes stories about miraculous events on Mount Wudang in 1412-1413, during the period of

toponymical explanation is attached to the other title by which the mountain is known since the Ming, Mount Taihe 太和山: it is linked to Zhenwu's role as a divine guardian against malevolent forces, as the pacifier of the land.

Some traditions trace the link between Zhenwu and Mount Wudang to creation myths. According the canonical *Xuantian shangdi qisheng lu*, it was Yü himself who “decided to make this mountain which controlled the Door of Earth – the door through which he had first led the waters into the Great Abyss so that they might “return to the Origin” for recycling – the center of the Somber Warrior's [Zhenwu] cult. The same text describes the Somber Warrior as a “transformation of the Celestial One of the Great Yin, the Five Potent and Somber Elders of the Energy of the Beginning of Anterior Heaven.” He therefore lives in the Palace of True Felicity of the Celestial One.”⁹³ This account is, in fact, a composite work which integrates various oral and textual traditions depicting Zhenwu's role as defender of the empire; six of its chapters can be regarded as the textual counterpart of a series of temple frescos dedicated by the emperor Song Renzong in 1057.⁹⁴ This text is also the longest theogonic account of Zhenwu before *Origin*, with which it shares numerous elements.

Zhenwu's life story provides a narrative roadmap to the mountain. As Chao notes, the Zhenwu myth was written into the history of the mountain and its temples as “Daoists mapped a sacred atlas on the landscape of Mt Wudang comprising locations where episodes of Zhenwu's

construction sponsored by the imperial court. See also Judith M. Boltz, *Survey of Taoist Literature: tenth to seventeenth century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 86-91, 119-120.

⁹³ Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History*, p. 96. The bulk of *Xuantian shangdi qi sheng lu* is drawn from an eleventh-century text, but its commentary probably dates to the thirteenth century. See Boltz, *Survey of Taoist Literature*, pp. 86-91.

⁹⁴ The emperor's statement is recorded at the end of the *Qisheng ji* 啟聖記 compilation, based on chapters 2-8 of the *Xuantian shangdi qi sheng lu*.

life were staged, episodes that illuminated the progression of his divination.”⁹⁵ The abovementioned *Wudang fudi zong zhen ji* discusses dozens of sites associated with Zhenwu’s life across the mountain, highlighting specific places endowed with more divine power (*ling*), where sacrifices earn more merit and prayer is guaranteed to be acknowledged. In describing the scenery of the mountain, the author of this text, Liu Daoming, vacillates between explicit and metaphoric allusions to Zhenwu’s hagiography. When introducing a place of interest (cave, temple, peak, etc.), Liu recounts a relevant episode in Zhenwu’s life, and consequently explains how this connection to Zhenwu reshaped the landscape of that site, both its man-made monuments and its natural scenery.

Liu Daoming deciphers, somewhat lyrically, the natural formation of the scenery as reflecting symbolic elements as well as specific events in Zhenwu’s hagiography. For instance, Zhenwu’s emblems, the tortoise and snake, are invoked to characterize the structure and appearance of cliffs, rivers, and vales. The text reiterates the cardinal importance of Zhenwu’s austerities and ascendance to the physical and metaphysical transformation of the mountain. Liu writes that “when the Dark Emperor traveled the area of the three cliffs, the rocks were colored in hues of gold and silver.”⁹⁶ Quoting an inscription from the *Pictorial Hagiography of Zhenwu*, (perhaps the fifteenth-century *Zhenwu lingying tuce* 真武靈應圖冊) Liu writes that when “the Dark Emperor offered music in tribute to heaven in this place [Ascendance Platform, *feisheng tai* 飛升台], five dragons carried him up, and the ground was dyed gold and jade.”⁹⁷ Elsewhere in the text, Liu Daoming mentions that thanks to Zhenwu’s attainment on the mountain, the area is

⁹⁵ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, p. 95.

⁹⁶中有玉清、太清、太子三岩，皆玄帝遊息之地，石皆作金銀之色。

⁹⁷按《圖經》碑刻，玄帝奉天韶於此，五龍掖之上升，地皆變金玉之色。

rife with “celestial gold and silver stones” (金星石, 銀星石) that can be used to cure illnesses in children. Zhenwu’s ascension even had a lasting impact on the flora and fauna in this area; when describing a type of red autumn flower called Heavenly Flower (*tianhua* 天花) that is common on Mount Wudang, Liu Daoming writes that “when the Dark Emperor ascended, these [flowers] were scattered in the cliffs and valleys, and to this day they are an enduring [testament?] to the immortal’s legacy.”⁹⁸

Liu Daoming’s account deviates somewhat from Zhenwu’s life story as it is presented in *Origin*. For instance, out of nearly sixty places mentioned in *Origin*, only three are also mentioned in the *Wudang fudi zong zhen ji*. However, this is not surprising considering that most of the sites that the *Wudang fudi zong zhen ji* discusses relate to moments of little importance to Zhenwu’s hagiography: it mentions numerous places where Zhenwu made sacrifices, met other people, or performed mundane tasks – all of which are not critical junctions in the narrative of his life story and could be multiplied infinitely. In other words, for the writer who wishes to elevate the importance of certain locales or attribute meaning to various natural phenomena, Zhenwu’s tenure on Mount Wudang as an ascetic provides a blank canvas that could be expanded ad infinitum.

In contrast to the literati emphasis in poetry and travelogues on the natural beauty and unique atmosphere of the mountain, albums and geographic anthologies of late Ming glanced over the mountain’s physical landscape, focusing instead on its temples and sites associated with Zhenwu. Wang claims that “all topographies on Wudangshan are exclusively religious in nature,

⁹⁸昔玄帝升真，散之巖谷，迄今仙裔傳之無窮。

and scenery is never the focus.”⁹⁹ It is perhaps for this reason, among others, that Mount Wudang was “never considered a subject of “literati paintings for ‘high-culture’ mountains.””¹⁰⁰ A rare artistic portrayal of pilgrims traveling to one of Mount Wudang’s most famous temples of Zhenwu is the “Clearing sky after snow on the purple empyrean palace at Mount Wudang” by Xie Shichen (c. 1487-1567), who is remembered for his religiously-inspired works (including the hagiographic album *Zhenxian shiji* discussed in the previous chapter).¹⁰¹ The majority of textual and visual depictions of Wudang reveals that the topographic landscape of Wudang, its appearance and atmosphere, were almost irrelevant to the centrality of the range as a locus of political, religious, and cultural meaning.

The late-Ming encyclopedia *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會 provides a telling example of this religio-hagiographical emphasis. Compiled by Wang Qi 王圻 and his son Wang Siyi 王思義 in 1607 (just five years after the publication of *Origin*), the *Sancai tuhui* attempted to provide a comprehensive survey of the world, from astronomical charts through biographies of important individuals to human anatomy and daily-life utensils. Both in its content and ordering of information, this ambitious project sheds valuable light on the worldview of Jiangnan literati. Its geographical volume devoted six double-leaf pages of text and one double-leaf of illustration to Wudang, three times more space than it devoted to any other mountain (other mountain receive merely one or two double-leaf pages).¹⁰² The illustration shows the general landscape of the

⁹⁹ Wang, “Qiyunshan as a Replica of Wudangshan,” p. 53.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, pp. 301-305. Xie Shichen devoted numerous works to religious themes, including the pictorial-hagiographical album *Zhenxian shiji*, which is discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁰² See Wang Qi 王圻 and Wang Siyi 王思義, *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會 (1607; photocopy in Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), pp. 379-382.

mountain dotted with temples, though without attaching their names to the picture. The long entry on Wudang focuses entirely on culturally-significant sites, particularly man-made structures such as temples and gates. It lists important sites subsequently according to their location, describing the monuments and vistas that visitors would encounter as they progress along one of the mountain's main routes. In this fashion, the text does not aim at a bird-view, accurate geographic portrayal of the mountain, but rather embraces the point of view of travelers, describing succinctly what they would see as they traveled, even noting where they could sit and linger. Nearly all the sites that the text mentions relate to the life-stories of either Zhenwu or Zhang Sanfeng.



武當山在襄陽均州從界山驛西行四十里至遇真宮宮前開朗夷曠不甚峻始宮名會仙館仙人張三丰居焉故今夷廡下有銅像東方丈有遺像各一與世所傳像稍異觀東二里曰修真觀又東曰鶴鶴嶺上有太山廟出仙關其上有黑虎潭潭上有二石峻峭中廣如屋可坐其下洞深莫測常有雲氣西北行四十里至紫雲宮宮負展旗峰下峰迤邐球盡千仞壁削宛然皂纛形其左右有泉池四並清澈可汲欄梵磴球甚立前左曰日池右曰月池前右曰大善泉後右曰上善泉從殿後右轉陟山椒有巖曰太子巖巖名以帝故蓋帝為淨樂國王子也上有三天字甚深可辨其左曰蓬萊第一峰亦橫刻巖上有泉一泓風吹餘瀝四散其濺如沫如珠可挹出道士院左折北上曰鍊丹巖右折西上曰七星巖又上為三清巖絕險不可到杉檜桐梓陰翳甚鬱仰過三公山巖敞焉迤邐擁大小寶珠二峰後負嶽宮前古松數百株皆參天倚雲距此北十五里有觀曰復真觀一名太子坡殿下有池曰聖母滴淚池相傳帝為太子時葉家若此其母追泣故云距北十里曰龍承觀在九溪渡天津橋上自此南折深入有巖曰玉虛

Figure 20: Illustration and description of Mount Wudang in *Sancai tuhui*

An even more elaborate portrayal of Wudang saw light in the contemporaneous geographic encyclopedia titled *Hainei qiguan* 海内奇觀, published in 1609 by Yang Erzeng 楊爾曾 (the author of the hagiographic *Origin Narrative of Han Xiangzi*, among other works).¹⁰³ As a topographical compendium, this work was composed largely of illustrations and maps. Yang Erzeng, as Richard Wang notes, “was the first to make an illustrated topography on multiple geographical sites, thus establishing the genre of illustrated national religious landscape.”¹⁰⁴ Significantly, Yang positioned Mount Wudang in a superior position vis-à-vis other sites that he surveyed by devoting an entire volume (*juan*) to Mount Wudang (all other volumes in the *Hainei qiguan* include multiple sites). The high esteem with which Yang regarded Wudang is further exemplified by the fact that he devoted ten leaves of illustration to Mount Qiyun–Jiangnan’s “Little Wudang”—whereas he only dedicated a single-leaf page to any other site or mountain.

The volume on Mount Wudang (*juan* 9) includes nine double-leaf illustrations depicting monasteries, main roads, famous peaks, mountain gates, and even schematic layouts of important temples. Both in its images and textual notes, the mountain functioned as a canvas for its human activity; its natural landscape was never the focus of attention, but merely served as a background for the structures that elevated Wudang above other mountains: its temples, monasteries, and monuments. After a general introduction of the mountain and its sites, Yang

¹⁰³ Yang Erzeng 楊爾曾, *Hainei qiguan* 海内奇觀 (1609), in the Rare Book Collection of C.V. Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University. See reprint in *Siku quanshu* 四库全书, *shibu* 史部, *dililei* 地理类 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995-1999, vol. 721), pp. 482-496.

¹⁰⁴ Wang, “Qiyunshan as a Replica of Wudangshan,” pp. 45-46.

provided detailed description of the most important temples in Wudang: Taihe gong 太和宮, Nanyan gong 南岩宮, Zixiao gong 紫霄宮, Wulong gong 五龍宮, Yuxu gong 玉虛宮, Yuzhen gong 遇真宮, Ying'en gong 迎恩宮, and Jingle gong 淨樂宮. In *Hainei qiguan*, the mountain's natural scenery, flora and fauna, sights and atmosphere, seem to have been utterly irrelevant. For Yang, it is the interplay between human, divine, and demonic forces that set this place apart from the rest of “all under heaven” and spurred the construction of temples and monuments. Having transformed the landscape of the mountain, these man-made structures provide the *raison d'être* for visiting the mountain, while the stories underlying them shape the experiences of those who make the trip.



Figure 21: Illustration and description of Mount Wudang (here named Taihe shan) in *Hainei qiguan*

Writings on Wudang vary extensively in their attention—or lack thereof—to the natural scenery of the mountain. While poetry and travelogues celebrate the panoramic views of the mountain and the atmosphere or inspiration it evoked in the writer, other compositions, especially gazetteers and geographic encyclopedias, focus primarily on the human history of

Wudang and its man-made monuments, as we have seen above. Thus, it is no surprise that Zhenwu's hagiography and temples occupy a more central position in the latter group of texts. In both types of texts, the story of Zhenwu's life formed the basis of the religious *imaginaire* of Wudang. As Chao phrases it, "the natural settings of the mountain (i.e. the stone, river, and trees) were reinterpreted as landmarks of Zhenwu legends. The mountain was woven into the Zhenwu story, and Zhenwu was etched into the landscape of the mountain. Little by little, the Daoists "colonized" the mountain and made it into a central stage of Zhenwu's life."¹⁰⁵ This "colonization" of Wudang by the Zhenwu myth is particularly evident in gazetteers and geographic compendia that give his hagiography and the sites associated with him a prominent position in their depiction of the mountain. The *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* represents a watershed in the depiction of Wudang in that it collapses the boundaries between its natural scenery and its man-made monuments. By depicting how Zhenwu's spiritual and exorcistic exploits transformed Mount Wudang, the narrative underscores the link between geography and hagiography, obliterating the dichotomies between the natural landscape and the cultural heritage of the mountain.

5. 1. Visiting the Mountain

The link between Zhenwu's life story and Mount Wudang is not only explored in writing, but it is represented physically and visually at the sites, temples, and monuments on the mountain. The Wulong gong 五龍宮 (Five Dragons Palace) "was no less than a classroom of Zhenwu hagiography."¹⁰⁶ According to Liu Daoming's account, in addition to Zhenwu paintings and

¹⁰⁵ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

statues, four walls of the main hall in the Five Dragons Palace displayed murals depicting Zhenwu's life story. The arrangement of other deities in the various halls of the temple and the design of the entire compound were likewise instructive, representing the relationship between Zhenwu and the rest of the pantheon. Visiting this temple and other monuments on the mountain thus allowed visitors to deepen their familiarity with the Zhenwu lore, his life story, his position and significance within the Daoist pantheon.

Who were these visitors? Travelers to Mount Wudang during the Ming Dynasty came from all walks of life, including imperial envoys, literati, merchants, and commoners. Lay visitors usually traveled as a family or with an organized group of pilgrims; lone travelers were rarer. Yuan Zhonglang 袁中郎 (1568-1610), one of the most prolific landscape-writers of Wudang in late Ming, composed this poem following a trip to Wudang in 1602:¹⁰⁷

全家都愛踏青煙，
過去青山香火緣。
扶著白頭拜真武，
被人呼作地行仙。

The entire family loves treading the green mist,
Passing the incense smoke of the clear mountain.
Supporting my father as he bows in reverence to Zhenwu,
Others call him an immortal who walks on earth.

Temple records show that most visitors arrived in the first four months of the year, correlating with the birthday of Zhenwu. Mei Li divides the officials who traveled to Mount Wudang into three groups: officials who participated in imperial envoy missions, officials serving in the area surrounding the mountain, and officials from other regions who traveled to Wudang for a variety of reasons, including tourism, pilgrimage, or a combination of both. Officials associated with an imperial envoy mission were sent to supervise the religious

¹⁰⁷ See Di Qi 齐地, "Yuan Zhonglang de Wudang shi" 袁中郎的武当诗," in *Ziran, lishi, daojiao*, p. 492.

institutions and the construction of temples, as well as to seek Zhenwu's political support, divine protection, and assistance in bringing rain. Although the majority of visitors, or pilgrims, to Wudang came from Hubei and neighboring provinces (as Lagerwey, De Bruyn, and Mei convincingly show), there are also accounts of massive pilgrimage expeditions from farther provinces that demonstrate the importance of Wudang as a national cult center. For instance, De Bruyn notes that "Suzhou organized an annual pilgrimage to Mount Wudang that drew several thousand people who traveled over 2,000 miles (mainly by boat) in about six weeks."¹⁰⁸

What drew visitors to Mount Wudang? Naturally, as visitors differed extensively in status and inclination, their motivations for traveling to Wudang must have varied to some degree as well. For literati visitors, the aesthetic appreciation of the mountain's scenery and atmosphere was of cardinal importance to their experience of Wudang. Meeting with clergymen and residing in temples sometimes marked the highpoint of the journey to Wudang for certain scholars and pious patrons. However, all those who journeyed to Wudang, regardless of social station, were drawn to the mountain for its spiritual potency and its significance as the earthly residence of Zhenwu. According to late-Ming sources, visiting the places where Zhenwu cultivated himself and ascended to heaven, offering sacrifices at his temples, and praying for good fortune were the main activities shared by all visitors. The hope of encountering Zhenwu himself on the mountain provided further motivation to embark on the journey to Wudang. Lagerwey writes that "the mountain was organized from plain to peak as the unfolding story of the god's own ascension from human crown prince to divine emperor. The ascension of Wu-tang Shan meant, therefore, a progressive encounter with the Perfect Warrior [Zhenwu]."¹⁰⁹ In *Wudang jishengji*, Luo

¹⁰⁸ De Bruyn, "Daoism in the Ming," p. 617.

¹⁰⁹ Lagerwey, "The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang Shan," p. 315.

Tingzhan writes that “Wudang covers the universe like a cloth, all can personally see the Revered Emperor (Zhenwu) soaring above it.”¹¹⁰

During the Ming dynasty, pilgrimage to Wudang reached unprecedented heights. The traffic of visitors to the mountain was so great that the state introduced a visitor tax (literally, “incense tax,” *xiangshui* 香税) in the fifteenth century. This tax increased the flood of income to Wudang to such an extent that the state used it to fund the troops stationed nearby for a short period in the sixteenth century.¹¹¹ This levy on visitors to important sites, particularly sacred mountains, was not unusual in late-imperial China, and continues to this day.¹¹² The extensive corpus of writings about Wudang, particularly travelogues and *biji*, reveal that the main pilgrimage routes on Mount Wudang were so crowded with visitors that entering the mountain resembled “entering a city,” and to enjoy the mountain’s unique scenery and atmosphere, one would have to stray far from the main paths. The multitudes of visitors to Wudang during the Ming were not only personally inspired by their travels, but brought back impressions and mementos to their hometowns, further cementing the link between Wudang and the Zhenwu lore in the popular imagination and religious practice.

5. 2. Zhenwu and Wudang: Beyond the Mountain

An important manifestation of the bond between Zhenwu and Wudang is its duplication in Zhenwu temples across China (including that in the Forbidden City), and its replication in miniature form in religious practice. Ritual practice places Zhenwu not only on the geographical

¹¹⁰武當如布滿乾坤，沖舉皆親見帝尊。See Luo Tingzhen 羅霆震, *Wudang jisheng ji* 武當紀勝集 (DZ 963).

¹¹¹ Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-tang Shan,” p. 300. This tax was abolished in 1736.

¹¹² Mei Li, *Mingqing shiqi wudangshan chaoshan jinxiang yanjiu*, pp. 107-119.

Mount Wudang, but also on representative “Wudang” temple altars. The mountain is symbolically replicated within the sacred space of the temple: the statue of Zhenwu is placed on an altar titled “Mount Wudang,” along with the other Four Saints that represent the four directions (Zhenwu, who represent the north, holds the highest position among them).¹¹³ Since the Song dynasty, when Wudang was first perceived as the *axis mundi* of the Zhenwu lore, new temples dedicated to Zhenwu were also named after the mountain.¹¹⁴



Figure 22: a “Mount Wudang” temple altar at the Beiji dian 北極殿, Tainan, Taiwan (photograph by author, 2014)

Mount Wudang is further duplicated in other foci of Zhenwu reverence across China, known as “little Wudang Mounts” (*xiaowudang* 小武當).¹¹⁵ Richard Wang studied the association of Zhenwu with another sacred mountain, Mount Qiyun 齊云山 (in modern Anhui

¹¹³ Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History*, p. 45.

¹¹⁴ Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, p. 82.

¹¹⁵ Wang Guangde and Yang Lizhi, *Wudang daojiao shilue*, pp. 220-221.

Province), which might have been the most important among the regional branches of Zhenwu-Wudang reverence.¹¹⁶ Wang argues that the highpoint of religio-cultural activity in Mount Qiyun was during the Jiajing reign (1522-1566), correlating with the imperial patronage of Wudang as part of a broader project to transform the religious map of China, though it differed in its attempt to promote literati culture at Mount Qiyun (earning it the epithet “Little Wudang of Jiangnan” 江南小武當). According to Wang, “the Daoist community at Qiyunshan deliberately mimicked Wudangshan institutions” by sending its Daoist priests to study on Mount Wudang and bring back seeds of the Langmei Tree, which is believed to have been created by Zhenwu during his sojourn in Wudang.¹¹⁷ Considering the great number of pilgrims who traveled to Mount Qiyun from neighboring regions, Wang positions Qiyun as a Jiangnan center of pilgrimage during the Ming, mirroring Wudang’s place as a national pilgrimage center of Zhenwu. Wang further notes that during the Ming, the religious traits of Qiyun overshadowed any other quality that might attract visitors, pilgrims, and imperial investment. The same could also be stated regarding Mount Wudang; the overwhelming majority of travelers (and consequently funds) that flowed to the mountain were drawn to it primarily because of its Daoist aspects, chief among them was its association with Zhenwu.

¹¹⁶ Richard G. Wang, “Qiyunshan as a Replica of Wudangshan and the Religious Landscape of the Ming Empire” (*Journal of Chinese Religions*, Vol. 42, No. 1, May 2014), pp. 28-66.

¹¹⁷ This fact is particularly interesting considering that Zhengyi priests did not normally travel (unlike Quanzhen priests and practitioners, for whom travel was essential). The affinity between the religious traditions of Wudang and Qiyun that shared the same set of rituals and registers (*lii*) transmitted on Mount Longhu by the Heavenly Masters. See Wang, “Qiyunshan as a Replica of Wudangshan,” p. 31-33.

6. The God's Tour: Zhenwu in Motion

In *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*, while still a hermit on Mount Wudang, Zhenwu received a divine edict ordering him to embark on inspection tours of the world twice a year to investigate good and evil (巡遊天下，驗察善惡).¹¹⁸ His journeys, however, are not limited to these bi-annual descents; Zhenwu is called repeatedly to lend an (exorcistic) hand in the human world. After enjoying a feast at the court of the Jade Emperor and attending a celestial conference for the first time – on his very first day at the office, so to speak – Zhenwu notices ominous clouds of demonic pollution hovering above the human realm, like a demonic roadmap marking precisely where his help is needed. His first order of business is to defeat and enlist the Turtle Demon and Snake Demon, born of Zhenwu's stomach and intestines. With these two emblematic generals by his side, Zhenwu descends again and again to the world to subdue and convert the rest of his destined army of thirty-six generals.

In these exorcistic journeys, which make up the second half of *Origin*, Zhenwu redraws the spiritual map of the universe, transforming the world by purifying the land and harnessing malign forces to the benefit of mankind.¹¹⁹ In this respect, the narrative mirrors one of the most prominent aspects of the Zhenwu cult: his regular descents to the human world in order to conduct “inspection tours,” the god's protective-cum-exorcistic excursions (*xunyou* 巡遊, *xuncha* 巡察). In fact, *Origin* does more than narrate these excursions; it supplements the narrative of Zhenwu's life story with a timetable listing all the days on which Zhenwu is

¹¹⁸ This episode appears in chapter 9 of *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North*. The days on which Zhenwu is ordered to descend to the human world are the ninth day of the ninth month and the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month.

¹¹⁹ Zhenwu's travels to pacify the world (descending from heaven) are contrasted in the narrative with the journeys of the demons he vanquishes, who often travel (descending the mountain) in search of victims to terrorize and consume.

expected to descend each year.¹²⁰ What did these divine descents and excursions mean to the readers of *Origin*?

The world of our late-Ming readers was populated by gods and immortals who roamed the earth throughout the year. Some gods were believed to have descended on specific dates to inspect and protect, many were summoned upon request, and others – particularly carefree immortals – journeyed between realms as they pleased. “[T]he god is seldom still, as it is constantly asked to private homes or into the mountains for a variety of purposes,” writes Kenneth Dean. In his ethnographic work on religious practice in Fujian Province, Dean lists healing the sick, making excursions into the mountains to find herbs, and selecting the orientation of a new house among the many possible reasons to invite a god to descend outside the regular timetable of his or her descents.¹²¹

The most important dates in the calendar of Zhenwu worship are his birthday and the days on which he is expected to descend and conduct inspection tours of the human world. During the festivities of the god’s birthday, it is the worshipers who are expected to travel, that is, visit the god in his temples and offer sacrifices; however, during the rest of the year it is Zhenwu who must travel to the human world, warding off misfortune and demonic pollution. These frequent trips of the god are conducted by carrying a statue of the god in a sedan chair designed specifically for that purpose. At each stop made by Zhenwu in his sedan chair and in each household he visits, people burn incense and welcome him with pious congratulations.¹²²

¹²⁰ It is important to note that these dates only mark the regular days of descent; a Daoist practitioner can also request the god’s protection through ritual and invite him to descend whenever his help is needed.

¹²¹ Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 127-129. Dean also quotes a gazetteer according to which the Patriarch of the Clear Stream (Qingshui 清水) is believed to be a manifestation of Zhenwu in Fujian.

¹²² See Qi Tao 齐涛 et al., *Zhongguo minsu tongzhi: Xinyang zhi* 中国民俗通志: 信仰志 (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005), pp. 255-257. The sixteenth day of the first month is invariably identified with Zhenwu’s descent

Besides the fixed dates of Zhenwu's descents, he is summoned by Daoist clerics and spirit mediums to exorcise demons or solve problems throughout the year.

Ritualistic processions dotted the calendar of the laity in late-imperial China. Late-Ming readers had most likely witnessed ritual processions several times a year, or at least once a year, during the New Year celebrations. Contemporaneous data about such processions is scarce, since late-Ming officials and literati rarely wrote about such popular practices, and even then – their accounts cannot be taken at face value. Textual descriptions of the annual Zhenwu festival in Puyuan in the Yangtze delta, for instance, severely critique the lavish celebrations as pointless extravagance and the criminal activities that accompanied the festivities.¹²³ Nevertheless, modern ethnographic documentation might shed some light on these rituals. In *Sacrifice and Spectacle*, Johnson described numerous processions in villages in Northern China wherein the statues of deities were carried along a designated route, making occasional stops and deviations.¹²⁴ Every household wished the deity's sedan chair would stop by their residence, bringing blessings and warding off misfortune for the coming year. During these processions, the assumption was that the gods themselves were physically present. Carrying the gods out to conduct an inspection tour

to the world, but some local traditions also hold that Zhenwu descends to inspect the land on a regular basis every month on the 6th, 16th, and 26th days; other dates include the 7th day of the first month, 8th day of the second month, 9th day of the third month, 4th day of the fourth month, 5th day of the fifth month, 7th day of the sixth month, 7th day of the seventh month, 13th day of the eighth month, 9th day of the ninth month, 21st day of the tenth month, 7th day of the eleventh month, and 27th of the twelve month. See Cao Liu 曹流, *Shanshui youdao: Wudang taiji wenhua chanye fazhan yanjiu* 山水有道: 武当太极文化产业发展研究 (Wuhan: Huazhong keji daxue chubanshe, 2014), pp. 79-80.

¹²³ See excerpts from the accounts of Li Rihua 李日華 and Xie Tianrui 謝天瑞 who witnessed these festivals in the first decade of the seventeenth century in Richard von Glahn, "The Sociology of Local Religion in the Lake Tai Basin" in John Lagerwey ed., *Religion and Chinese Society: vol. II: Taoist and Local Religion in Modern China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2006), pp. 779-781.

¹²⁴ David Johnson, *Sacrifice and Spectacle: the ritual foundations of village life in North China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp. 73-91, 168-170, 249-250.

was not understood merely as a symbolic or metaphoric act. Although the basic route is determined by the organizers, no one knows in advance where exactly the god will choose to go and where he will choose to stop. Johnson and Dean described moments during such processions when the sedan chair suddenly became unusually heavy, which was understood to mean that the god was signaling them to stop. The understanding was, in other words, that the deity truly occupies his or her sedan chair – that he or she physically descends to the human world to embark on these protective excursions.

According to Johnson, the highpoint of the New Year procession and festivities of Shanxi Province villages was an exorcistic performance enacted on the ground in front of the village stage, titled “Zhenwu expels the ten evil spirits” (*Zhenwu chu shi sui* 真武除十祟). In this performance, which Johnson described as a “typical ritual drama,” an actor playing Zhenwu was invited to come on stage, accompanied by the Turtle and Snake generals. Grasping his treasure sword, Zhenwu blocked the demons, announced the commands of the Law, and symbolically reestablished the four directions. Another actor sang a summarized version of Zhenwu’s hagiography. The drama concluded with a communal singing of the “Song of Subjugating the Demons,” sending off the god with drums and shouts.¹²⁵ Thus, Zhenwu was understood to be physically present and the reenactment of his subjugation of demons was seen as a genuine act of exorcism that guaranteed good fortune for the new year.

¹²⁵ Johnson, *Sacrifice and Spectacle*, pp. 74-76, 169-170. Johnson stresses the military aspect of many village rituals, especially New Year practices that focus on warding off demonic pollution. The military flavor and exorcistic focus of New Year customs explain why Zhenwu plays such a central role in these rituals. Military formations (*zhen*) and demonstrations of martial arts might have fulfilled a double role – exhibiting the military prowess of the locals, as well as deterring/vanquishing supernatural foes. This militaristic aspect of the New Year celebrations sits well with Zhwnwu’s role as a warring god.

The god's mobility and his agency during processions and "bringing of the incense" (*jinxiang* 進香) rituals are sometimes invoked to explain changes in the religious landscape, and sometimes even negotiate tensions between different social groups. Michael Szonyi mentions stories circulating in the Hutou area in Fujian that explain the introduction of Zhenwu into the local temple, a contested issue, as a result of a ritual procession. According to these stories, when Zhenwu was carried in a procession by the Houshan temple, he refused to leave, despite the locals' objections. His statue became so heavy that the men carrying his sedan chair could not lift it. The local god who resided in this temple, the Venerable King of Heroic Martiality (*Yingwu zunwang*), attempted to drive Zhenwu away by posing a difficult challenge: reversing the course of a nearby stream. Alas, for a mighty god such as Zhenwu this proved no challenge at all, and the local god—and his worshipers—had no other choice but to accept the interloper Zhenwu. Another account, this time from a local Daoist text, tells that once, when Zhenwu's image was brought to collect incense, he refused to leave the temple. This angered the local people, but the local god—the Venerable King—suggested (through a spirit medium) that Zhenwu should be given a chance to signal through divination whether or not he wished to stay. The divination blocks indicated that this was indeed his wish, and so he remained in that temple.¹²⁶

Late-Ming laypeople regarded Zhenwu's inspection tours not only as exorcistic, but also as excursions for examining the moral status of humanity. As noted above, Zhenwu was commonly regarded as a fortune deity of sorts, who punishes evil and rewards the righteous. The fifteenth-century hagiographic album *Pictorial Hagiography of Zhenwu* (*Zhenwu lingying tuce* 真武靈應圖冊) describes Zhenwu as a god of the north who descends to the human world every

¹²⁶ Michael Szonyi, from chapter 6 of a yet-to-be-published book manuscript. I am very grateful to Professor Szonyi for sharing this material with me, as well as for his references and suggestions for this chapter.

month in order to examine the deeds of mankind (真武是北極神將逐月下降察人善惡).¹²⁷ This role is also central to two hagiographical essays about Zhenwu included in the commercially-published fiction collection *Guose tianxiang* 國色天香.¹²⁸ The first entry, titled “Eulogy for the Emperor of Dark Heavens” (*Xuantian shangdi chuijie wen* 玄天上帝垂誡文), is a first-person narrative wherein Zhenwu presents himself as the “Fortune Deity who Rules the World” (*Zhishi fushen* 治世福神). According to him, he is an incarnation of the Jade Emperor who descends to the world to cure illnesses, bring down rain, and examine the moral stature of mankind. This first-person account is the most personal of all Zhenwu hagiographies I came across; it brings the stern and mysterious Dark Emperor closer to the readers, addresses them personally. It also adds a dramatic flavor to Zhenwu’s hagiography by invoking the self-introductions of actors as they come on stage.

The following entry, “Admonition by the Emperor of Dark Heavens” (*Xuantian shangdi chuixun wen* 玄天上帝垂訓文), is framed as an edict bequeathed by the Jade Emperor. It follows along similar lines, depicting Zhenwu as a fortune deity who is responsible for combating demonic threats as much as human faults. It claims that Zhenwu roams heaven and earth on his inspection tours, examining the merit and demerit of gods and men (天上天下游巡，糾察神人功過), and pacifies the world (四海之內太平). In their emphasis on karmic retribution, both entries take after morality books (*shanshu* 善書). Most importantly for the current discussion,

¹²⁷ See Xiao Haiming, *Zhenwu tuxiang yanjiu*, pp. 246-247, plate 29. Zhenwu’s role as a fortune deity who metes out retribution to mankind is highlighted throughout this album.

¹²⁸ *Guose tianxiang* was originally published in 1597 in Nanjing by the Zhou 周 family publishers. See reprint in *Ming Qing shanben xiaoshuo congkan* (Taipei: Tianyi chubanshe yinxing, 1985), *juan* 4, vol. 2, pp. 52-55, upper register. This collection also includes autobiographical accounts by Lü Dongbin, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

they portray Zhenwu as a god who is always in motion, a protective yet fierce god who is defined by his inter-realm journeys.

A less visible, though no less potent, type of journey that the god embarks on takes place within the ritual space or within the mind-body of a spirit-medium.¹²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Zhenwu is mostly summoned to assist in eradicating demons, especially fiends associated with mountains and the wilderness. Song-dynasty texts of “transformation of the body” (*bianshen* 變身) from the Celestial Heart (*tianxin* 天心) School include instructions for rites wherein the Daoist practitioner summons Zhenwu into the ritual space and invites him to possess the practitioner, so that he will be able to expel mountain goblins.¹³⁰ According to several manuals preserved in the Daoist canon, this practice includes several steps. First, the practitioner must make his case before the Highest Emperor in silent meditation; then, he is instructed to visualize the Jade Emperor and various deities taking up their seats in the hall. Afterwards, the practitioner must visualize Zhenwu (a detailed description of him is included) coming to the front of the altar table with the divine decree, and then transform into Zhenwu himself. Now embodying Zhenwu, the practitioner walks the stellar net of the Three Terraces (*santai* 三台) and the Dipper (*qixinggang* 七星罡), after which he invokes the various officials and generals of the Southern Court.¹³¹

¹²⁹ See Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, pp. 127-128.

¹³⁰ Poul Andersen, “Transformation of the Body in Taoist Ritual” in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 195. The Celestial Heart School (*Tianxin pai* 天心派) originated in the tenth century and became widespread around the twelfth century. Andersen notes that the rites of “transformation of the body” share many similarities with ritual dramas performed by professional actors or troupes, usually for exorcistic purposes, such as the Zhong Kui dances. See *ibid.*, p. 196.

¹³¹ Shin-yi Chao provides a translation and analysis of these ritual texts; see Chao, *Daoist Ritual*, pp. 52-58. See also Poul Andersen, pp. 186-208.

Zhenwu's celestial position and his exorcistic journeys also invoke a parallel between the god's tours and those undertaken by the earthly, human emperor. Von Glahn includes Zhenwu among China's "supreme gods" (alongside Dongyue 東嶽 and the Jade Emperor) who held sovereign authority and "were equated in status with the terrestrial monarch."¹³² As we have seen earlier, the bureaucratic metaphor underlies the Zhenwu lore; not only is he likened to the human emperor, but his life story, marked by subjugating and enlisting illicit forces into the ranks of the Daoist pantheon, reiterates the notion of parallel between the human and divine realms. With a foothold in both worlds, Zhenwu is tasked with purifying and pacify the human world while reordering the celestial ranks, conquering the land through consecration. In this sense, Zhenwu's role as a national exorcist and protector of the empire is closely tied to the sacred powers of territory and the role of territorial gods in protecting the land.¹³³

The imperial parallel is furthermore evident in Zhenwu's titles: he is the "Emperor of the Dark Heavens" and the "God of Fortune Who Rules the World." Not only that, but *Origin* even claims a physical similarity between Zhenwu and the Yongle Emperor; when the emperor embarked on a pilgrimage to Wudang and entered Zhenwu's temple, he discovered a physical likeness between them.¹³⁴ According to Li Chi, during the Yongle reign Zhenwu statues on

¹³² Richard von Glahn, "The Sociology of Local Religion in the Tai Basin," p. 774.

¹³³ Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, pp. 76-78. Zhenwu worship in late-imperial China went hand in hand with annual local festivals centered on the "congregations of territorial cults" (*shehui* 社會), some of which included military involvement. See *ibid*, p. 122.

¹³⁴ This scene appears in chapter 24: "我主排駕入廟行香, 見祖師相貌與我主前見相似, 心中大喜." There does not seem to be any historical evidence to support this storyline of Emperor Yongle's pilgrimage to Wudang. Seaman interpreted the last chapter of *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* as a later addition to the hagiography of Zhenwu, as part of an attempt to rekindle imperial investment in his cult center in Wudang. I do not think that was the case; in fact, the concluding episode of Emperor Yongle's investment in Wudang is in keeping with earlier hagiographies of Zhenwu. The mid-Ming pictorial hagiography *Zhenwu lingying tuce* 真武灵应图册, for instance, concludes with the proclamation of Yongle, the frenzy of construction on Wudang during his reign, and the miracles that accompanied them (plates 79-82).

Wudang were indeed made to resemble him and were even dressed in imperial robes.¹³⁵

Furthermore, the emperor encouraged the notion that he was a reincarnation of Zhenwu.

According to Seaman, “it seems to have been an obsession of the Yung-lo emperor to identify himself with the Dark Emperor.”¹³⁶ The *Ming shi* 明史 records that before he usurped the throne, Yongle waited for a sign from Zhenwu indicating the opportune moment to rebel against the ruling emperor, Jianwen. When Zhenwu and his troops appeared in the sky, Yongle let down his hair and drew his sword, copying the appearance and attitude of Zhenwu.¹³⁷

Moreover, during the Ming dynasty Zhenwu’s presence on Wudang was often compared to the emperor’s residence in the capital. Zhenwu, in fact, had his own Forbidden City at his cult center. Mount Wudang, Lagerwey writes, “is a mountain whose god ruled over the unruly world of the spirits much as the emperor ruled over China and who lived, like him, in a Forbidden City.” Lastly, Zhenwu’s journeys in *Origin* mirror those of the earthly emperor’s tours of the land.¹³⁸ These voyages are not merely exorcistic, but delineate a territory under his rule and protection, establishing his command over the land.

¹³⁵ Li Chi, *The Travel Diaries of Hsü Hsia-k’o* (Hong Kong: the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1974), p. 157; Seaman, *Journey to the North*, pp. 26-27.

¹³⁶ Yang, *Mingdai zongjiao*, p. 218; Seaman, *Journey to the North*, p. 26.

¹³⁷ Seaman, *Journey to the North*, pp. 25-26.

¹³⁸ The emperors’ tours were conducted primarily for political reasons, but they also allowed the court to inspect firsthand the areas under its rule and strengthen ties with local elites. During the Ming dynasty, the Jiajing Emperor embarked on several trips in the 1530’s. Far more famous, however, were the tours of the Qing emperors Kangxi and Qianlong.

7. Conclusions

When *Origin Narrative of Zhenwu of the North* was first published in the early years of the seventeenth century, the Zhenwu cult was at its zenith, and pilgrimage to its center on Mount Wudang reached unprecedented heights. While Zhenwu was a national god whose cult enjoyed imperial patronage and political significance, he was also worshiped, depicted, and narrated by all levels of local society, both publicly and domestically. Zhenwu's symbolic position as the "Emperor of the North" ties him to the water phase and its emblematic tortoise, while granting him a prominent role in defense against northern threats, both human and demonic. His role as a militant defender of the empire in general and its emperors in particular positions Zhenwu in the highest seat of divine power as the "Emperor of Dark Heavens," ruler of worlds, whose similarities to the earthly emperor were repeatedly emphasized by Ming rulers and reiterated in popular narratives. In a similar vein, Zhenwu's work as a divine protector and exorcist is devoted to the reordering of the world through bureaucratization of the otherworldly and demonic. In his journeys, Zhenwu subjugates illicit forces that cause problems in the human realm (be they demons, beasts, or even inanimate objects), and harnesses their powers by granting them a place within the Daoist pantheon as warring generals, serving under his command. Zhenwu's greatest gift as a militant god is rooted, ironically, in his role as a civilizing bureaucrat.

Zhenwu's elevated position within the Daoist pantheon and its liturgical traditions did not, however, limit his sphere of activity to the celestial realm. On the contrary, Zhenwu is a god defined by constant travel. Zhenwu's voyages take many forms. In his hagiography, Zhenwu travels from one incarnation to the next as he progresses on his path to enlightenment, but he also journeys across the geographical landscape of China, and between heaven and earth. As a protective deity, Zhenwu's role is marked by repeated descents to the human world to vanquish

demonic threats. As a fortune deity, Zhenwu also performs “inspection tours” in which he examines the moral stature of mankind and metes out rewards and punishments as karmic retribution. Although Zhenwu’s tours are conducted according to a set ritual schedule, clergy and pious individuals can also summon Zhenwu to descend into the human world at any given time for a variety of reasons. In these cases, Zhenwu could be summoned into the world to perform exorcism or provide other divine services, and even invited to inhabit for a brief period the body of the practitioner. It might have been Zhenwu’s constant journeying that marked him as a divine protector of travelers and spurred the construction of his temples near crossroads and rivers.

What was the significance of travel for the late-Ming readers of *Origin*, or as it was later known, *Journey to the North* (*Beiyouji* 北遊記)? What did *you* 遊 mean in this context?

Zhenwu’s own travels are manifold. In the narrative, Zhenwu—as one of the three souls of the Jade Emperor—leaves heaven to descend into the human world, where he goes through four incarnations. During his last incarnation, Zhenwu travels to Mount Wudang to devote himself to Daoist self-cultivation, a journey mirrored metaphorically by his spiritual quest for attainment. After his ascension, Zhenwu repeatedly descends to our world to combat and enlist to his army a horde of thirty-six demons. Although the narrative concludes with the construction of Zhenwu’s cult center on Mount Wudang, a fixed locale, his journeys do not end here. In fact, both the narrative and the ritual manual that follows it promote the notion that Zhenwu is expected to continuously descend to our world to exorcise demons and embark on inspection tours of the human realm. Moreover, the book advocates the active role of the reader-viewer, who is assumed to be engaged in cultic reverence of Zhenwu, highlighting his own role as a traveler – a potential pilgrim to Mount Wudang.

Mount Wudang serves as *axis mundi* in the Zhenwu lore as his earthly cult center, but it also exemplifies the centrality of travel in his legend. While the Zhenwu lore was by no means uniform in late-imperial China, Zhenwu's connection to Wudang invariably runs through his numerous textual and visual depictions. The mountain forms a bridge between worlds. It is to Mount Wudang that Zhenwu descends from the heavens, and it is to Mount Wudang that his worshipers travel to encounter him and seek his blessing. In his hagiographies, it was the mountain that posed the greatest challenge Zhenwu had to overcome, while also providing him with the guidance he required to attain the Way. The extensive variety of writings on Wudang and Zhenwu's life reveal that his lore not only shaped the religio-cultural perception of Wudang through the construction of monuments and toponymical explanations, but his self-cultivation and ascendance on Mount Wudang were conceived as having physically transformed its landscape and terrain, its flora and fauna. Furthermore, Zhenwu's intimate association with Wudang continues to be reproduced and duplicated in the titles of his temples throughout China, in his temple altars that are called "Mount Wudang," and in regional cult centers that are referred to as "Little Wudang." As a cosmography of the Zhenwu legend, *Origin* posits Mount Wudang at the center of his life story and sacred geography; the god and the mountain are inextricably intertwined.

"Sacred sites are founded on text," writes Marcus Bingenheimer, but they "are not only remembered in text; they are born of it."¹³⁹ *Origin* is a topo-creative text in the sense that it shaped the views and experiences of actual voyagers as well as "armchair travelers" to the mountain. Mount Wudang, in other words, was discursively constructed by a select group of

¹³⁹ Marcus Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin: Mount Putuo and its Gazetteers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 3.

texts among which *Origin* was the most widely circulated, accessible to a larger and more diverse audience than any preexisting work on either Zhenwu or Wudang. Concomitantly, the book's success hinged on readers' familiarity with the traditions of Zhenwu and Wudang, relying on the ritual context that has formed the lens through which late-imperial Chinese readers understood *Origin*. In other words, there was a reciprocal relationship between the book, Zhenwu reverence, and Mount Wudang.

Origin holds a special place among the plethora of writings on Zhenwu and Wudang. The book draws on a rich reservoir of hagiographic and liturgical literature in creating a chronography of Zhenwu, a narrative that weaves Zhenwu's life story and iconography with his sacred geography and ritual traditions. This work is not only the longest and most elaborate origin narrative of Zhenwu, but it was the only chronography of Zhenwu produced for a general audience and the only one appended with a worship manual. Zhenwu's iconography plays an important role in this book; it is described in detail numerous times and portrayed in the book's "picture-above-text" (*shangtu-xiawen*) illustrations. It is possible that this emphasis on Zhenwu's iconography and the combined reading-viewing effect of the *imagetext* of the "picture-above-text" format were used for, or facilitated, visualization practices. This visual aspect of the book further highlights its ties to the outside world, enabling performative reading.¹⁴⁰

The composition of *Origin*, as well as Yu Xiangdou's publishing interests, indicate that the book was intended for a wide and diverse readership that had an interest in Zhenwu not only as a cultural icon, but primarily as a deity. This origin narrative is perhaps best described as laypeople's scripture, that is, a cipher and ritual aid that also makes a compelling story, a kind of

¹⁴⁰ De Bruyn, *Le Wudangshan*, p. 15.

“literature of canonization” as Mark Meulenbeld aptly termed it.¹⁴¹ In this respect, in order to understand *Origin* and its significance during its time of publication, we must view it within the religio-cultural context in which it was read in southeast China around the turn of the seventeenth century. For those readers, Zhenwu was physically present in our world. He descended several times each year to conduct his inspection tours, he was summoned on occasion into the ritual space, and he was present on temple altars and in festival processions. Above all, he resided in his own Forbidden City on Mount Wudang, his earthly abode. In the narrative, appendix, and illustrations of *Origin*, the personal or domestic relationship of laypeople with Zhenwu merged with the broader public and national narratives of the god and his sacred geography. The reading experience of *Origin* was both informative and performative: it offered a comprehensive depiction of Zhenwu’s life, iconography, his sacred geography, and the history of his cult, coupled with practical instructions for his worship. Thus, the book played a key role in the discursive construction of Mount Wudang as the abode and earthly manifestation of Zhenwu in late Ming hagiographic *imaginaire*.

¹⁴¹ Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, p. 16.

Chapter 4

The Immortal's Voice: the "Autobiographical" Jottings of Lü Dongbin

1. Introduction	229
2. Lü Dongbin's Self-Accounts	236
3. The Immortal's Life in Verse	244
4. The Writing is on the Wall: Lü Dongbin's <i>tibishi</i>	255
5. The Immortal's Voice: Spirit Writing in the Lü Dongbin Lore	265
6. Conclusions	268

1. Introduction

The miraculous lives and adventures of heroes, immortals, and deities are usually told from a reverent distance. Most often than not, hagiographies give voice to the mortal recorder of these epic tales, as well as to the pious traditions of his fellow followers. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the hagiographies of Xu Xun and Zhenwu, whether in religious tracts, canonical texts, or commercially-published narrative texts, exalt these icons from an external point of view imbued with awe and reverence. In hagiographic narratives, the gods themselves do not take part in the narration of their own lives, and their own voices are seldom heard. But what happens when the protagonist joins the telling of his own life, adding his voice and point of view to his own hagiography? What happens when a god becomes a co-author of his or her own hagiographical depictions?

This chapter examines this question by focusing on the writings attributed to the immortal and patriarch Lü Dongbin.¹ Lü stands out among late-imperial China's cultural icons in his nearly-unparalleled active participation in his own portrayal and the narration of his own life.² In fact, this act of self-narration has become one of Lü Dongbin's most iconic traits. It is through Lü's writing that audiences and worshippers gain personal access to the immortal and, if they are fortunate enough, receive directly from him the esoteric teachings of Daoist inner-chemical cultivation. Yet the image of Lü Dongbin as it is conveyed by his writings is multifaceted. The various writings that are attributed to Lü reveal contending visions of the immortal, some painting him as an aloof ascetic whereas others depict him as a jocund libertine. Invariably, the various essays, poems, and couplets attributed to Lü share a profound faith in the power of writing, an underlying reliance on writings as the key medium for bridging worlds.

The late Ming represents a watershed in the popular reverence of Lü Dongbin as well as in the nature and scope of his "autobiographical" writings. I argue that this shift is closely related to the broader transformation in the reverence of cultural icons during late-Ming (as discussed in Chapter 1), which gave birth to the Wanli-era vogue of hagiographical narrative writing. In this chapter, I look at four aspects of Lü Dongbin's self-accounts in late Ming: prose essays

¹ Lü Dongbin has been the focus of much scholarly research, both as an individual cult figure and as a member of the Eight Immortals. Notable scholarly works on Lü include Isabelle Ang (1993, 1994); Jing Anning (1994); Baldrian-Hussein (1986); Eskildsen (1989), Paul R. Katz (1999); Li Yumin 李裕民 (1990); Lu and Luan (1986, 1990); Ma Xiaohong (1986, 1989); Ono Shihei (1968, 1979); Pu Jiangqing (1936); Wu Guangzheng (2006); Yang (1958); and Zhu Yueli (2014).

² Nevertheless, Lü Dongbin is not the only god or immortal to whom autobiographies were attributed. Terry Kleeman translated and analyzed an autobiography of the god Wenchang, also known as the god of Zitong, which was revealed through spirit writing. Although the text was supposedly revealed in 1181, the earliest extant version of it dates to 1645. See Terry Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale: the Book of Transformations of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zitong* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

celebrating his life, the poetry attributed to him, his writing on walls (*tibishi* 題壁詩), and the messages he transmits to his followers through spirit writing.

The origins of the celebrated Lü Dongbin have been the subject of much study and speculation.³ Legend has it that Lü Dongbin lived during the late Tang dynasty. By the Song dynasty, stories about him were in wide circulation across China, from Shanxi in the north to Jiangxi in the south, in tandem with the growth of his cult. During the Song, Lü became increasingly associated with the Jiangnan region, while his statues were placed in Daoist and Buddhist temples across China.⁴ The status of Lü Dongbin's cult in its earliest stages was low, and he was mostly worshiped domestically, through mediums and in small shrines.⁵ In 1119, he was awarded the low-rank official title of Perfected of Wondrous Powers (*miaotong zhenren* 妙通真人) by Emperor Huizong and integrated into official temples. With the growing popularity of Quanzhen Daoism, which honored Lü Dongbin as a patriarch, his cult continued to grow and he was promoted to Perfected Lord (*zhenjun* 真君).⁶

A variety of hagiographic and anecdotal depictions of Lü Dongbin during the Song presented disparate visions of the celebrated immortal, a diversity that accompanies his lore to this day. Lü Dongbin emerges from these portrayals as an inner-alchemy specialist, a miracle-

³ While there is a consensus among scholars today that there is no sufficient evidence to support the notion that Lü Dongbin was a historical figure of the Tang dynasty, there are certain scholars who still argue that he was a historical figure after all. Zhu Yueli hypothesized that he was a man of the Song, who lived circa 907-997. See Zhu Yueli 朱越利, *Daozang kao xin ji* 道藏考信集 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2014), pp. 186-187. Baldrian-Hussein discusses briefly the diversity of scholarly approaches to the legend of Lü Dongbin; see Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," p. 133-134.

⁴ Isabelle Ang, "Le Culte de Lü Dongbin," p. 477; Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," p. 149.

⁵ Ang, "Le Culte de Lü Dongbin," pp. 482-484.

⁶ Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Dongbin," in Fabrizio Pregadio ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 712-714.

worker, a calligrapher and poet, an artisan, a healer, an ink and paper merchant, a soothsayer, a libertine, and even a Buddhist. According to some accounts, Lü followed his master Zhongli Quan in seeking the Dao after he had failed the civil-service examinations three times; other accounts claim that he did pass the exams, but chose to renounce worldly affairs nonetheless. The diversity of his legend reflects the wide range of his followers, who came from all levels of Chinese society.

The first extant full-length hagiography of Lü Dongbin appeared in the *Yueyang fengtu ji* 岳陽風土記, composed by Fan Zhiming 范致明 in 1104.⁷ This hagiography incorporated many of the different aspects of Lü Dongbin's persona as seen in Song-dynasty anecdotes, but it also included for the first time information on Lü Dongbin's hometown and ancestry. Interestingly, this information is organized somewhat like an inverted biography: It begins with an anecdote about an inscription in the Yueyang tower, which leads to a brief description of his life.⁸ It surveys Lü's geographic origins, his failure to pass the examinations, his decision to become a recluse in Mount Hua which led to his encounter with Zhongli Quan and Kuzhu zhenren, who transmitted to him methods of immortality and exorcism that allowed him to attain the Dao. Fan Zhiming also describes a portrait of Lü Dongbin that shows him as a refined gentleman; it was commissioned by the Prefect of Yueyang (supposedly during a visit by Lü Dongbin!) and hanged in the Yueyang Tower for public viewing.⁹ Finally, the text describes in detail Lü's iconography and trademark swords. An expounded version of this biography was later found in the Yuan-

⁷ Fan Zhiming 范致明, *Yueyang fengtu ji* 岳陽風土記, p. 3; Katz, *Images of the Immortal*, p. 60; Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," pp. 141-143, 160.

⁸ Fan Zhiming, *Yueyang fengtu ji*, pp. 2-3. See also Baldrian-Hussein (1986), p.160.

⁹ Fan Zhiming, *Yueyang fengtu ji*, p. 3 (Erudition database). The city and tower of Yueyang are an important, recurring motif in the Lu Dongbin lore. See Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," p. 155. See also Ang, "Le Culte de Lü Dongbin," p. 482.

dynasty anthology *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑 by Zhao Daoyi 趙道一.

This version not only quoted two of Lü's most famous autobiographical poems, but also a decree by Emperor Huizong of the Song officially granting Lü the status of Perfected.¹⁰

Since the Jin-Yuan era, Quanzhen-affiliated writers began adopting stories about Lü Dongbin, while highlighting his role as an instructor of inner alchemy.¹¹ Quanzhen Daoism contributed considerably to the growth of Lü Dongbin's cult (as well as to the cults of other immortals) by transforming the notion of the altruistic, miracle-working itinerant Daoist immortal into an institutionalized belief system, canonizing celebrated immortals like Lü Dongbin, who is considered one of the movement's most important patriarchs.¹² According to Katz, the earliest Quanzhen hagiography of Lü Dongbin is found in the first chapter of the Yuan-dynasty work *Jinlian zhengzong ji* 金蓮正宗記, along with other patriarchs of the Quanzhen sect (Zhongli Quan, Wang Chongyang, and the Seven Perfected).¹³ This account states that he passed the *jinshi* exam, and only chose to renounce worldly life and follow Zhongli Quan after he encountered the master on Lushan when he was sightseeing (visiting the mountain's famous sites). It further depicts Lü's encounters with laypeople for whom he performs miracles as he travels incognito in the world, a recurring theme in his lore. The account ends with praises of Lü Dongbin and Zhongli Quan as compassionate, altruistic immortals, a depiction which conforms well to the Quanzhen view of immortals.¹⁴

¹⁰ Zhao Daoyi 趙道一, *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑, *juan* 45, pp. 339-341 (Erudition database).

¹¹ Katz, *Images of the Immortal*, p. 92.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹³ *Jinlian zhengzong ji* 金蓮正宗記, pp. 3-4 (Erudition database).

¹⁴ A similar account of Lü's biography is given, along with his portrait, in the *Jinlian zhenzong xianyuan xiangzhuan*, written in 1326. While it differs from the previous text in several biographical details, it follows the

The Yuan-era Quanzhen writer Miao Shanshi 苗善時 (fl. 1288-1324), who composed another influential hagiography of Lü Dongbin, regarded his iconography, biography, and stories associated with him as important vehicles of instruction: “I have collected stories [about Lü Dongbin] from Tang and Song histories and biographies, editing out all superficial material, and compiled a record of twelve stories, which I have named the *Shenhua miaotong ji*. I have done this in order to help scholars share my ideas... to see heaven’s signs, slightly merge the mysterious and clear aspects of the Dao, penetrate the great mysteries of the limitless ultimate, grasp the abstruseness of Chunyang [Lü Dongbin], thoroughly comprehend the ultimate Dao, and wholly attain the purity of the prior heavens.”¹⁵

Lü Dongbin has been celebrated as a writer since the earliest stages of his lore and cult. Poems and literary pieces were attributed to him as early as the Southern Song, and by the Yuan his biographies depicted him as a prolific author and poet.¹⁶ The immense body of literature attributed to Lü Dongbin since the Song dynasty covers several genres of writing, from poetry and prose to religious tracts and hagiographies of fellow immortals. His writings have been collated into anthologies several times in late-imperial China. The “Record of Patriarch Lü” (*Lüzū zhi* 呂祖志), which was compiled in the late sixteenth century shortly before the printing of the *Continuation of the Daoist Canon* (*Xu Daozang* 續道藏) in which it was included, remains

same narrative stipulating that Lü Dongbin passes the exams. Both texts highlight the practice of inner alchemy and pay particular attention to the development of his cult, primarily the construction of temples and worship of his image. See Katz, *Images of the Immortal*, pp. 81-83.

¹⁵ Miao Shanshi 苗善時, *Chunyang dijun shenhua miaotong ji* 純陽帝君神化妙通紀 (DZ 305). See also an online version of this work in ctext.org: http://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&res=83968&by_author=%E8%8B%97%E5%96%84%E6%99%82. Regarding Miao Shanshi’s life and career, see Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, “Miao Shanshi,” in Fabrizio Pregadio ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 745-746.

¹⁶ For instance, see Zhao Daoyi’s biography of Lü in the anthology *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian*. Regarding Lü as a writer and poet, see Ma Xiaohong articles from 1988-1989.

the largest corpus of texts related to Lü Dongbin in the Daoist canon. The following centuries saw additional and more extensive compilations of works attributed to Lü Dongbin. The *Daozang jiyao* included two anthologies of his writing, titled “Lord Lü’s Literary Collection” (*Lüdi wenji* 呂帝文集) and “Lord Lü’s Poetry Collection” (*Lüdi shiji* 呂帝詩集).¹⁷ Another important compendium is the “Complete Book of Patriarch Lü” (*Lüzü quanshu* 呂祖全書), compiled in 1742 by Liu Tishu and enlarged by Shao Zhilin in 1775.¹⁸ Lü is also credited with writing the preface to the 1903 edition of the Qing narrative hagiography of the Seven Perfected, *Qizhen zushi liezhuan* 七真祖師列傳.¹⁹ Although Lü is not the only immortal to whom poetry and religious tracts have been attributed, the extent of the materials attributed to him remains unparalleled.²⁰

¹⁷ See *Daozang jiyao* 12.5443-13.5622.

¹⁸ See Monica Esposito, “*Lüzü quanshu*,” in Fabrizio Pregadio ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 726-728. This compilation draws on earlier sources and includes a great number of texts revealed through spirit writing.

¹⁹ Vincent Durand-Dastès, “A Late Qing Blossoming of the Seven Lotus: Hagiographic Novels about the Qizhen 七真,” in Xun Liu and Vincent Goossaert eds., *Quanzhen Daoists in Chinese Society and Culture, 1500-2010* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 104.

²⁰ Essays and poems were also attributed to other members of the Eight Immortals, especially Zhongli Quan and Han Xiangzi, though their volume is incomparably smaller than the materials attributed to Lü Dongbin.

2. Lü Dongbin's Self-Accounts

“Autobiographies” attributed to Lü Dongbin that were included in gazetteers, literary anthologies, and Daoist works add a unique dimension to Lü’s kaleidoscopic legend.²¹ Most often, these accounts describe Lü Dongbin’s failure to pass the examinations, his retreat to Mount Lu (Lushan 廬山), his encounters with immortals who transmitted to him secret instructions for longevity, and his iconic flying sword. These accounts differ markedly, however, on the issue of asceticism, vacillating between depictions of Lü Dongbin as a wine-loving libertine who indulges in sexual pleasures, and portrayals of Lü as an aloof ascetic who is never tempted by worldly pleasures.

The earliest extant “autobiography” of Lü was inscribed on stone in Yueyang and later recorded in the *Nenggai zhai manlu* 能改齋漫錄 by Wu Zeng 吳曾 (fl. 1127-1160). According to this version, Lü Dongbin was a man of the Tang and a native of Jingzhao 京兆 (Shaanxi), who failed the examinations and retired to Mount Hua, where he met Zhongli Quan and the “bitter bamboo perfected” (Kuzhu zhenren 苦竹真人) from whom he received instruction in methods of exorcism and longevity.²² The text goes on to mention Lü Dongbin’s amusement with the popular hearsay that he sells ink and that his flying sword can behead people. Instead, Lü paints himself as one who scorns worldly pleasures, stressing that the purpose of his three swords is to cut illusion, covetousness, and concupiscence.²³

²¹ Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature,” p. 141-143.

²² The name of the “bitter bamboo perfected” might be connected to a type of bitter bamboo that is used in medicine, and is found in the area of Mount Lu, where according to most accounts Lü Dongbin cultivated the Dao under Zhongli Quan’s guidance. See Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature,” pp. 140, 163.

²³ See translation in Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature,” p. 163-165; Ang, “Le Culte de Lü Dongbin,” pp. 67-68; and discussion in Katz, *Images of the Immortal*, pp. 60-61.

The Wanli period in the late Ming saw the appearance of several self-accounts by Lü Dongbin in canonical and commercially-published works. These self-accounts were incorporated into anthologies devoted to Lü Dongbin, such as the “Record of Patriarch Lü” (*Lüzū zhi* 呂祖志) and “Collected Works of Patriarch Lü Chunyang” (*Chunyang Lüzū ji* 純陽呂祖集), as well as other types of literary compilations, such as the erotic fiction anthology *Guose tianxiang* 國色天香 (see below).²⁴ The accounts included in the *Lüzū zhi* and *Guose tianxiang* are almost identical, and seem to have been inspired by the abovementioned Song-era hagiography of Lü in Fan Zhiming’s *Yueyang fengtu ji*.

The “autobiography” of Lü that appeared in the *Lüzū zhi* 呂祖志 was frequently quoted and seems to have had a profound impact on the development of his hagiographic *imaginaire* in late Ming. The *Lüzū zhi* was included in the *Continuation of the Daoist Canon* during the Wanli period and remains the most comprehensive collection of texts in the Daoist canon devoted to Lü Dongbin.²⁵ The compendium opens with portraits of Lü Dongbin and Zhongli Quan, carrying Quanzhen regency titles decreed in 1269. The work is divided into two main sections: “traces” (*shiji zhi* 事蹟志) or “accomplishments” (*shiji zhi* 事績志), and “literary writings” (*yiwen zhi* 藝文志), both comprised of thirteen chapters.²⁶ The latter section of “literary writings” contains

²⁴ For information on the *Lüzū zhi* – see below. The *Chunyang Lüzū ji* was compiled by Yang Liangbi 楊良弼 in 1583 and published by the Yang family firm. It included eight *juan*; the first three *juan* focused on the immortal’s “traces” (including his biography and autobiography), whereas the last five contained a collection of the immortal’s poems and songs. The content of the first three *juan* of *Chunyang Lüzū ji* corresponds almost entirely to that included in *Lüzū zhi*. The *Guose tianxiang* edited by Wu Jingsuo 吳敬所 (fl. 1587) and printed in 1587 by Zhou Yuejiao 周曰校 at the Wanjuan lou 萬卷樓 printing house in Nanjing. See Richard G. Wang, “Practicing Erotic Fiction and Romanticizing Late-Ming Writing Practice” (*Ming Studies*, no. 44, 2000), p. 79.

²⁵ Judith Boltz dates this anonymous text to the late sixteenth century, just prior to the printing of the *Continuation of the Daoist Canon* during the Wanli period. See Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature*, pp. 142-143.

²⁶ There is an incongruity between the table of contents, where the first section is titled “traces,” and the body of the text itself, which is titled “accomplishments.”

over 250 poems (*shi* 詩, *ci* 詞, and *qu* 曲) attributed to Lü Dongbin, including many of Lü's communications through spirit writing.²⁷ The first five *juan* of this section are exclusively devoted to his poetry, much of which reads as first-person narratives by Lü. The sixth *juan* is more diverse, including instructions (*jue* 訣), chants (*yin* 吟), short prose pieces (*wen* 文, *ji* 記), and songs (*ge* 歌), some of which discuss other immortals than Lü Dongbin. These pieces all share a focus on spiritual attainment through the practice of inner alchemy.

The first section contains a hagiography of Lü reminiscent of the account given in the above-mentioned *Chunyang dijun shenhua miao tongji*. It is followed by a brief autobiography, or a self-introduction of sorts, titled “self-narrative of the Perfected” (真人自記):

“I am a man of Jingchuan. During the late Tang period, I participated in the civil service examinations three times, but failed to pass. I therefore traveled in the rivers and lakes, when I met Zhongli Quan, who bequeathed the teachings to me. After a while, I encountered the immortal of bitter bamboo, who transmitted to me the teachings of combining the sun and the moon.²⁸ I resided for a long time on Zhongnan shan when I met Zhongli Quan again, and gained from him the teachings of the “golden-sap great cinnabar.” At age fifty, I finally began to attain the Dao. My height is 5 *chi* and 22 *cun*. My face is yellowish-white, my nose is high and straight, and on my left eyebrow I have a black mole. I wear a white garment, fastened with a black belt. My transformations are unpredictable; sometimes I appear as a scholar or a soldier. People say that I have a flying sword that can hack men. I hear that and laugh: that which is mercy, is Buddha. Immortals are just like buddhas, how could they possibly take human life? Indeed, I have swords, but they are different from hearsay: one that cuts greed and anger, a second that cuts love and lust, and a third that cuts worry and anxiety; altogether three swords. Since attaining the Dao, I have converted two people: He Xiang and Guo Shangchong (?). Their nature was right, I taught them the teaching of returning to the origin. I try to speak to the people of this world; they revere me as Perfected, but it is not as good as doing my deeds [i.e. following my example]. If one does as I do and follows my lead, there is no need to see me – one could achieve the Dao by oneself. Otherwise, what is the benefit of traveling with me every day? (For this record, see “Pavilion of Gazing at the River in Jiangzhou”).

²⁷ Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature*, pp. 142-143.

²⁸ The sun and the moon refer to yin-yang in the context of inner alchemical practice.

真人自記

吾京川人，唐末三舉進士不第，因游江湖間，遇鍾離子受延命之術。尋又遇苦竹真君，傳日月交並之法。久之適終南山再見鍾離子，得金液大丹之功。年五十，道始成。身長五尺二寸，面黃白，鼻聳直，左眉有黑子。服白欄衫，系皂條，變化不可測，或為進士，或為兵，世多稱吾能飛劍戮人者。吾聞之，笑曰：慈悲者，佛也。仙猶佛爾，安有取人命乎。吾固有劍，蓋異於彼，一斷貪瞋，二斷愛欲，三斷煩惱，此其三劍也。吾道成以來所度者，何仙姑、郭上寵二人。性通利，吾授之以歸根法。吾嘗謂世人，奉吾真何若行吾行，既行吾行又行吾法，不必見吾，自成大道。不然日與吾遊，何益哉。(此記見江州望江亭)。²⁹

This account summarizes succinctly the key biographical and iconographical details that characterize the lore of Lü Dongbin. First, the emphasis on Lü's iconography seems odd for a first-person narrative, but is actually in line with the iconographic stress in dramatic and cultic representations of the Eight Immortals, whose members must be easily identified by their appearance. The sixteenth-century literatus and avid traveler Wang Shizhen noted that the emergence of the Eight Immortals as a group is closely related to iconography.³⁰ Second, this self-presentation supports the view of Lü as an itinerant ascetic. It does not include any references to Lü's famous love of wine or his associations with women, thus providing a more orthodox vision in line with Quanzhen depictions of the immortal. Moreover, in this account Lü states that his sword(s) are used against living beings, but rather serve as tools for self-cultivation. In this regard, it follows the earliest "autobiography" of Lü, the abovementioned inscription recorded in the *Nenggai zhai manlu*.

This account also appears verbatim in the popular fiction anthology *Guose tianxiang*, under the title "Chunyang's self-account at the Pavilion of Gazing at the River" (*Chunyang wang*

²⁹ *Lüzü zhi* 呂祖志, *Wanli xu Daozang* (DZ 1485).

³⁰ Hawkes, "Quanzhen Plays and Quanzhen Masters," p. 169.

jiang ting ziji 純陽望江亭自記).³¹ The account opens a subsection in *juan* 6 of *Guose tianxiang*, titled “Secret Instructions for Cultivating the Real” (*xiuzehn mizhi* 修真秘旨), that is entirely devoted to Lü Dongbin and inner alchemy. It is followed by a series of texts attributed to Lü Dongbin which includes admonitions, ruminations about karmic retribution, poems concerning inner alchemy, and songs celebrating the carefree life of the immortal. It paints a saintly image of Lü as a moralizing patriarch who warns against retribution and encourages divine reverence.

This image of Lü is markedly different from the libertine and exuberant immortal of popular tales and narrative texts like *Tale of the Flying Sword* and *Tale of the Eight Immortals*. Moreover, it stands in stark contrast to the lewd character of the erotic stories that occupy the lower register of *Guose tianxiang*. The printing layout of *Guose tianxiang*, as mentioned in previous chapters, is that of two parallel horizontal registers occupying each page, wherein the lower register contains erotic tales and the upper register contains miscellaneous materials, many of which are of religious nature. What did late-Ming readers make of the juxtaposition of erotic fiction and the didactic, moralizing tracts attributed to Lü Dongbin that populate these parallel registers of *Guose tianxiang*? What were their expectations from and reactions to this coupling of risqué narratives with inner-alchemical poems and *shanshu*-type moralizing essays? Did this strange juxtaposition have any balancing effect for the reader? Or, alternatively, did it inspire a comic or ironic reading of these texts?

³¹ Wu Jingsuo 吳敬所, *Guose tianxiang* 國色天香 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), pp. 510-511. It is interesting to note that both the *Lüzuzhi* and *Guose Tianxiang* tie this self-account to the famous “Pavilion of Gazing at the River,” which is often used as the setting and subject of poems attributed to Lü Dongbin.

A very different vision of Lü is given in another “autobiography” included in the Dehua 德化 county gazetteer.³² According to this account, Lü Dongbin’s original name was Li Qiong 李瓊 (*zi* Boyu 伯玉). It tells that Lü married a woman née Jin 金 with whom he had four children, and that after age fifty he passed the examinations and received an official post. Despite his burgeoning official career, Lü and his wife left their children in order to cultivate the Dao and relocated to a secluded mountain residence in a cave, where he took the surname Lü (visually “two mouths” 呂) and the *zi* Dongbin 洞賓 – “he who resides in a cave.” After his wife passed away, he took the name Chunyang. The emphasis on iconography that characterizes other “autobiographies” of Lü is also evident here: Lü describes a few key traits of his physical appearance, including a mole near his eyebrows, a broad nose, and a sleek beard.

This self-account is very curious for several reasons. It contradicts the brief biography of Lü that precedes it, which follows most accounts of Lü’s life-story, according to which he never passed the examinations and retired to Mount Lu to study Daoist arts in seclusion. By contrast, this account depicts Lü Dongbin as having familial and social obligations. Yet it also portrays him as one who chose to abandon his four sons and an official career in order to seek the Dao – a much greater sacrifice compared to his personal trajectory in most accounts, where he has no family ties or other social obligations and only turns to Daoist cultivation after a series of unsuccessful attempts to pass the examinations. Notwithstanding its deviations from the prevalent story of Lü’s life, in its structure and focus this account follows the format of other Lü Dongbin “autobiographies,” comprising a summary of his personal details, his iconography, his

³² Dehua xianzhi 德化縣志, *juan* 51, pp. 2954-2955 (Erudition database).

search for the Dao and his roaming in the human world, complete with a wordplay of his chosen name.

Late Ming audiences did not only read Lü Dongbin's autobiographies, but also watched actors present the character of Lü on stage as a first-person account. Drama plays (*zaju* and *chuanqi* mostly) celebrating Lü Dongbin and the Eight Immortals usually included a self-presentation of Lü's character as he comes up on stage for the first time. These self-presentations follow Lü's autobiographies in several respects, though they are significantly shorter. All self-introductions of Lü Dongbin begin with his names (Lü Yan, *zi* Dongbin, Daoist name Chunyang Zi). Often Lü describes himself as a scholar of the Tang who passed the civil service examinations. All self-presentations mention his fateful encounter with Zhongli Quan, who became his mentor and transmitted to him Daoist techniques, but the details of their encounter change from one play to another; in some plays, Lü tells that he met Zhongli Quan on the Handan road (邯鄲道路), while in others it is Mount Zhongnan 終南山 or Mount Zhongtiao 中条山. In some dramas, Lü Dongbin mentions other important milestones in his hagiography, such as the Yellow Millet Dream (黃糧夢), his practicing of inner alchemy, or his ascension to heaven (飛昇紫府名列真仙).³³ This self-presentation, however, never takes up more than a few lines that focus on a handful of key details about Lü, mentioning in passing famous scenes in his legendary life.

³³ See for instance the *zaju* plays *Lü Chunyang dianhua du Huanglong* 呂純陽點化度黃龍, *Lü Dongbin tao liu shengxian meng* 呂洞賓桃柳昇仙夢, *He sheng ping qun xian zhushou* 賀昇平群仙祝壽, and *Zhong tianxian qinghe changsheng hui* 眾天仙慶賀長生會, and the *chuanqi* plays *Handan ji* 邯鄲記 and *Lü zhenren huangliang meng jing ji* 呂真人黃梁夢境記.

Another avenue for encountering Lü Dongbin during late Ming was presented by narrative texts such as *Tale of the Eight Immortals* and *Tale of the Flying Sword*, which brought the immortal to life by combining his origin story with writings attributed to the protagonist himself.³⁴ The appendix following the narrative of *Tale of the Eight Immortals* includes three brief essays attributed to Lü Dongbin. Although these essays are not “autobiographical” in a strict sense, that is, Lü does not narrate in them the trajectory of his life, they depict his life experiences as an immortal. The first among them, titled “Preface for the Ascending Immortals Tower Pavilion of Guixi” 桂溪昇仙樓閣序, is signed by “the Perfected Chunyang Lü of the Tang” (大唐真人純陽呂), and is dated winter 1583. Most of this essay is devoted to Daoist inner alchemy and Lü’s efforts to pursue the Dao. Lü dedicates this essay to a certain patron by the name of Zhang Junxi 張君熹 who contributed the funds to build this pavilion. Lü’s dedication stresses that although he roams the world and the paradises of Penglai and Yingzhou freely and no one knows his comings and goings, he still visits this pavilion. Here the essay clearly uses the voice of Lü Dongbin to eulogize a donor and publicize the new building.³⁵

The third essay in the series, also signed by Lü, is titled “Account of the Scenery of Penglai” (*Penglai jing ji* 蓬萊景記), dated autumn 1573, and transmitted to Yu Jia 余嘉 and Zhang Junxi 張君熹 through spirit writing.³⁶ Lü describes himself here as a “man of letters who

³⁴ Their full titles read *Baxian chuchu dongyou ji* 八仙出處東遊記 and *Tangdai Lü Chunyang dedao Feijian ji* 唐代呂純陽得道飛劍記.

³⁵ Similarly, the second essay in the appendix, signed by Lü at the “Ascending Immortals Tower Pavilion,” is dated 1596 and likewise praises a patron of Daoism, in this case a certain Feng Jundou 馮君斗 who, according to this text, had accumulated a mountain of good merit by writing exegeses and sponsoring the carving of printing blocks.

³⁶ Yu Jia and Zhang Junxi appear multiple times in the *Dongyouji* appendix as the recipients of Lü Dongbin’s messages through spirit writing. I have not been able to find any information on these two individuals. This lack of information leads me to hypothesize that they were not important literati nor did they pass the examinations or held an official post. It is very likely that Yu Jia belonged to the Yu clan of Jianyang of whom Yu Xiangdou, the publisher, was also a member.

roams the world” (余於世之墨客流), a term that poignantly combines two key aspects of Lü Dongbin lore: his writing and his travels. In this essay, Lü describes the landscape of Penglai, the legendary paradise of the immortals: the awe and wonderment of gazing from Penglai’s golden terraces, passing by its azure ponds, walking in its jade palaces, and wandering through its bamboo groves. This depiction of the experience of visiting Penglai is coupled with descriptions of its terrain, flora, and fauna. In some respects, this account resembles a travelogue, a *youji*, only one that is devoted to a place beyond the geographical reach of the book’s human readers.

3. The Immortal’s Life in Verse

As Pei-yi Wu notes, “much of Chinese poetry is autobiographical,” and in many respects it is much more personal than autobiographical (prose) writing in pre-modern China.³⁷ Poetry, argues Stephen Owen, “was a privileged document of inner life, a presentation of self that potentially carried strong autobiographical dimensions.”³⁸ Since autobiographical writing, precisely like biographical writing, was traditionally committed to the public and objective stance of the historian, “the subjective and personal would only find an outlet in lyrical poetry.”³⁹ The impersonality of the evidence-based historical account is thus contrasted with the personal and original creativity that blossoms in poetry. Interestingly, the supposedly-autobiographical jottings attributed to Lü Dongbin combine these two aspects of traditional Chinese writing about

³⁷ Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian’s Progress: Autobiographical Writing in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 16.

³⁸ Stephen Owen, “The Self’s Perfect Mirror: Poetry as Autobiography,” in Shuen-fu Lin and Stephen Owen eds., *The Vitality of the Lyric Voice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 74.

³⁹ Wu, *The Confucian’s Progress*, p. 6. Wu further argues that the development of autobiographical writing in China is rooted in its movement from history (*shi* 史) to belles-lettres (*wen* 文), and it is the tension between these two that gives autobiography “a unique position among all literary genres.” Ibid, p. 8.

the self. In both prose and poetry, Lü describes his life from external and internal points of view at the same time; factual summaries of his origins and iconography go hand in hand with jovial reflections on his experiences and the ways in which he is perceived by society.

Writing poetry has been a key feature of Lü Dongbin's lore from its earliest stages. The earlier extant records of Lü in Song-dynasty anecdotes already celebrate him as a traveling bard.⁴⁰ A considerable collection of poems attributed to Lü appears in anthologies of Tang poetry composed in later centuries, such as the *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (though many of the poems included in it were probably no earlier than the thirteenth century). He Zhiyuan 何志淵 gathered over 200 poems by Lü in a compilation titled "Chunyang zhenren hunchengji" 純陽真人渾成集, which he regarded as the product of divine inspiration.⁴¹ Some of Lü's famous poems sprouted commentaries and exegeses.⁴²

While poetry attributed to Lü Dongbin, including pseudo-autobiographical poetry, was already in circulation during the Song dynasty, it was the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that saw the expansion of, and experimentation with, Lü Dongbin's self-accounts in different genres

⁴⁰ Ang, "Le Culte de Lu Dongbin," pp. 74-75.

⁴¹ He Zhiyuan encountered these poems in Shanxi while he was collecting materials for a new Daoist canon (the *Xuandu baozang* 玄都宝藏). According to Boltz, "internal evidence suggests that the verses were composed well after the Ch'uan-chen tradition has gained a foothold in the northern plains." See Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature*, p. 141.

⁴² One of the most famous and frequently-quoted poems attributed to Lü is "Spring in the Garden by the Qin River," 沁园春 a short alchemical ci poem. This poem is among the most famous texts of the Zhong-Lü tradition, and became a "fundamental component of the literary heritage of both Nan-tsung and Quanzhen" according to Boltz. Although the date of its composition is unknown, its transmission is recounted in an anecdote included in Liu Fu's 刘斧 (1040-after 1113) *Qingsuo gaoyi* 青琐高议, according to which this poem was revealed to a scholar by Lü Dongbin himself, disguised as a cobbler. The poem generated several commentaries, among them the "Jiezhu Lugong Qiyuan chun" 解住注吕公沁园春 by Xiao Tingzhi 萧廷芝, included in the anthology *Xiuzhen shishu*, and the "Lü Chunyang zhenren Qi yuan chun dan ci zhujie" 吕纯阳真人沁园春丹词注解 by Yu Yan 俞琰. See Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature*, p. 142, and Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, "Qiyun chun," in Fabrizio Pregadio ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 807.

of writing and the first time that they were commercially produced for a wide readership. Many of his poems were included in the Zhengtong Daoist canon of the mid-fifteenth century and the canon's supplement of the Wanli period in late Ming. During this period, poems attributed to Lü Dongbin were also recorded in a variety of publications, from *biji* collections and gazetteers to fiction anthologies and hagiographical narratives. The writing of poetry remained one of Lü's prominent characteristics throughout late-imperial times and into the modern era. During the Ming and Qing, Lü Dongbin's poetry was composed, circulated, and cherished as a bridge to the enlightened, carefree life of the roaming immortal, as well as a form of communication with Lü himself.

The corpus of poetry attributed to Lü Dongbin that appeared in print during the late Ming focuses on four main themes: Daoist cultivation and inner alchemy, the carefree life of the immortals, Lü's travels, and the problem of recognizing the immortal. Many of his poems touch upon two or more of these themes. Ruminations about Daoist cultivation and practicing inner alchemy are often entangled with lyrical depictions of Lü's carefree and joyous life, whereas poems depicting his travels nearly always end with an amused frustration about the inability of the unenlightened folk to recognize him. A common thread that runs through Lü's poetry is its focus on the final – and eternal – stage in the immortal's legend, that is, Lü Dongbin as a perfected, deified immortal who roams between realms as he pleases. These poems do not depict the earlier stages in his hagiography; they do not discuss his origins, his social and familial ties, his initial motivation to follow the Dao, the hardships and obstacles that he encountered on his path to attainment, or his scuffles with his master Zhongli Quan. They are not poems about *becoming* Lü Dongbin, but rather they present an image of Lü as a final product, akin to an iconographic portrait in verse.

One of the sole examples of Lü Dongbin's poetry from an earlier stage in his life appears in the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* in the form of a poetic exchange between Lü and Zhongli Quan. This poetic exchange follows a hagiographical sketch of Lü Dongbin, summarizing his ancestry and early life, complete with a celestial origin (as the reincarnation of the Daoist Dong Hua) and a birth-story rife with auspicious signs. It recounts that Lü met Zhongli in a tavern at age 46, after he had failed the examinations and has already taken his first steps in the direction of Daoist cultivation, having received a treasure sword from the Yellow Dragon Immortal of Mount Lu. In this scene from chapter 23 of *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, Zhongli, disguised as a scholar, writes the following three-part poem in order to lure Lü to the Daoist path:⁴³

其一曰：

坐臥常攜酒一壺，不教雙眼識皇都。

乾坤許大無名姓，疏散人間一丈夫。

其二曰：

傳道真仙不易逢，幾時歸去願相從。

自言住處連滄海，別是蓬萊第一峰。

其三曰：

寞厭追歡笑話頻，尋思離亂可傷神。

閒來屈指從頭數，得到清平有幾人。

Sitting and crouching I often carry a bottle of wine, (so as to) not cause my eyes to recognize the imperial capital.

The universe is nameless; (I am) a gentleman dispersed in the human world.

It is not easy to encounter a true immortal who transmits the Dao; when should one follow him back to the desire of appearances? From speech's [or: my speech] residence links the deep blue sea, it is not the first peak of Penglai.

Lonesome I frequently loathe following joyous, laughing talk; consider that departure and chaos could injure your spirit.

Count from the start: how many people have reached pure tranquility?

⁴³ Different versions of this poem also appear in several Ming and Qing collections, such as *Yinchuang zalu* 吟窗雜錄, *Wanshou Tangren jueju shi* 萬首唐人絕句詩, *Quan wudai shi* 全五代詩, and other collections.

To convey his readiness to seek the Dao, Lü Dongbin replies with his own poem:

生在儒家遇太平，懸纓重滯布衣輕。

誰能世上爭名利？欲事天皇上玉清。

Born in a scholar's house I encountered tranquility; the tassel and belt [i.e. official robes] are heavy and sluggish, plain clothes are light.

Who would compete for fame and fortune in this world? [Rather] I prefer to serve the Heavenly Emperor and accede to the Upper Clarity.

A different version of this poem appears in chapter 2 of *Tale of the Flying Sword*, which depicts the exact same scene of Zhongli Quan meeting Lü Dongbin in a tavern and trying to convert him:

生在儒林遇太平，懸纓重深布衣輕。

誰能世上爭名利，臣事玉皇歸上清。

Born in a scholar's house I encountered tranquility, the thread of worry [i.e. official's life] is heavy and deep, [whereas] plain clothes are light.

Who would compete for fame and fortune in this world? I prefer serving the Jade Emperor as minister and returning to the Upper Clarity.⁴⁴

While the narrative of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, as a combined hagiography of the Eight Immortals, gives us a glimpse of Lü as a novice disciple of Zhongli Quan, in the appendix that concludes the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, Lü Dongbin speaks and sings to the reader as the deified, perfected immortal. In the appendix, Lü's prose essays (discussed in the previous

⁴⁴ Other versions of this poem appear in the *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑 (DZ 296), *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, *Quan wudai shi* 全五代詩, and other collections.

section) are followed by a long series of poems penned by Lü and revealed through spirit writing. Following along the lines of Lü's essays, his poems likewise discuss inner alchemical cultivation and revel in the wonders of the paradises of Penglai and Yingzhou. This poem, which is said to have been revealed to a certain Zhang Gongyin 張拱寅, ties Lü's inner alchemical cultivation to his joyous, free existence:

速把金蓮火內栽，蓮中煨箇人如咱。
神光照徹滿乾坤，拍手呵叱天外酒。

Quickly plant the golden lotus within the fire,
In the lotus's raging fire is a man like me.
A divine illumination pervades the universe,
I clap my hands and sigh, free beyond heaven.

The following two-part poem draws a parallel between the universe, Lü's own existence in this world, and the inner alchemical process. In the appendix, it is titled "Birth of the Morning Sun" (*dan shi ri shi* 誕晨日示, thus stating that it was revealed, though in this case the text does not mention to whom):

一
父母生晨不記年，唐朝時日是謠言。
水中火起胎吾月，火里蓮開誕我天。
渴飲玄滿玉兔髓，飢飡碧漢金烏涎。
筭來成道生身日，未有乾坤我在先。

1.
I cannot remember the year of my parents' birth, the era of the Tang Dynasty is a rumor. The month in which I [became] a fetus – fire rose within water, when I was born – a lotus opened within the fire.
When thirsty, I drink my fill of the darkness, the essence of the Jade Rabbit [=the moon], when hungry, I eat the jade Han, the saliva of the Golden Crow [=the sun].
The day I attained the Dao, I was reborn; before there was a universe, I already existed.

二
觀盡塵埃事慘然，玄門脩煉授真傳。

2.
Observe all [the world of] dust and its grieving matters, I bestow the true teachings - the cultivation practices of the Gate of Darkness.

當年附鳳攀龍客，今日乘鸞跨鶴人。

Those people who at the time attached themselves to the phoenix and climbed the dragon, [became] today those who ride the phoenix and fly on a crane.

石點為黃頃刻就，汞軋作白即時成。

A piece of rock turns yellow – instant accomplishment, the mercury turns white – an immediate attainment.

諸君若問名和姓，洞里忘憂宮上仙。

If people ask my name and surname, [I am] the immortal of the upper palace who forgot his worries in a cave.

Lü Dongbin's inner alchemical verses appear in various versions in late Ming works. The abovementioned *Guose tianxiang* includes several long poems about inner alchemical cultivation, such as “Tapping Song” (*qiaojiao ge* 敲交歌), “Stove-top Pot Song” (*yaotou pi ge* 窯頭坯歌), and “Ode to Father Fish” (*yufu ci* 漁父詞).⁴⁵ The latter is among Lü Dongbin's most famous inner alchemical poems, which also appears in other late-Ming works, including *Lüzü zhi* and *Tale of the Flying Sword* (though in an abridged version). Nevertheless, not all of Lü's poems show him as a serious Daoist practitioner of inner alchemy or a perfected being. In *Tale of the Flying Sword*, Lü Dongbin unabashedly indulges in wine and other pleasures of the human world. As a legendary hero, these indulgences are accordingly excessive and exaggerated. In chapter 8, he consumes an enormous amount of wine, and then passes out. The terrified tavern owner mistakes him for dead and buries him. However, soon afterwards Dongbin waddles down the road, singing this song (*ge* 歌):⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The *qiaojiao ge* 敲交歌 supposedly dates from the late Tang, but the earliest record of it dates from the Wanli period in late Ming, when it was included in the *Lüzü zhi* and later in the *Lüzü quanshu*. See Ma Xiaohong 马晓宏, “Lü Dongbin shici kao: Lü Dongbin zhuzuo kao lue zhi san” 吕洞宾诗词考 -- 吕洞宾著作考略之三 (*Zhongguo Daojiao*, no. 1, 1989), p. 31.

⁴⁶ This poem also appears in the *Lüzü zhi*, *juan* 5, under the title “writing to advise the world” (*quanshi wen* 勸世文).

一毫之善，與人方便。
一毫之惡，勸人莫作。
衣食隨緣，自然快樂。
算甚麼命，問甚麼卜。
虧人是禍，饒人是福。
天眼恢恢，報應甚速。
諦聽吾言，神欽鬼伏。

A speck of good, gives people convenience.
A speck of evil, urges people to not act.
Food and clothing comply with fate, nature is joyous.
What fate do you calculate, what divinations do you consult?
To treat people badly is disastrous, to forgive people [brings] good fortune.
The eye of heaven is vast, retribution swift.
Listen carefully to my words, [and consequently] the gods will revere and the demons prostrate [before you].

After which, he composes this poem:

鶴不西飛龍不行，露乾雲破洞蕭清。
少年仙子說閒事，遙隔彩雲聞笑聲。

The crane does not fly west nor does the dragon go, the dew has dried and the clouds break, the cave desolate and quiet.
A young immortal speaks of leisurely affairs, far away from the rosy clouds, the sound of laughter is heard.

The literary section of the *Lüzü zhi* contains numerous poems attributed to Lü Donbgin depicting his life of divine immortality as a perennial journey across the universe, reveling in the beauty of nature and the celestial realms beyond:⁴⁷

四言自述
唐朝進士，今日神仙。
足躡紫霧，卻返洞天。
月朗風清，一聲鐵笛。
均山回首，四海無跡。

Autobiographical poem in four words
[Once] a scholar of the Tang era, today a divine immortal.
It suffices me to tread on purple mist, returning to heavenly paradises.
The moon is bright and the wind clear, a sound of iron flute.
Looking back at all the mountains, there is no trace of the four seas.

⁴⁷ See *Lüzü zhi*, *juan* 5. This poem is also quoted in the *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, *juan* 258, p. 5707 (in the *Sikuquanshu*, accessed through Erudition database)

Lü's carefree life is also celebrated in the appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* in poems like this one, simply titled "singing alone" 自詠:

吾家住在碧雲深，不比塵凡別樣行。

My residence lies deep within the blue clouds,
it cannot compare to the common [world of]
dust, it is distinct in appearance and conduct.
Nine summers I returned to the fire in my
own stove, for three winters I did not sleep in
fabric bedding.

九夏還親爐內火，三冬不卧榻中氈。

Crowned, I ride the white crane toward the
sky, again I straddle the black ox into the
dormant cave.

冕騎白鶴臨空去，復跨青牛入洞眠。

My comings and goings in the human world –
without traces and footprints; who can
recognize I am a divine immortal?

來往人間無影迹，誰能識得是神仙。

The immortal's travels are a key trait of Lü Dongbin's life as a perfected being, one that is particularly appealing to audiences and worshippers who harbor hopes to encounter the immortal in person. Among the many places he visits, two sites became particularly identified with the legend of the itinerant Dongbin: the Yellow Crane Tower (*Huanghe lou* 黃鶴樓) and the Yueyang Tower (*Yueyang lou* 岳陽樓).⁴⁸

In chapter 9 of *Tale of the Flying Sword*, Lü Dongbin visits the Yellow Crane Tower and meets a local magistrate who fails to recognize him. Sighing with disappointment, he writes this poem on the wall of the tower:⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Regarding stories and poems of Lü Dongbin about towers and pavilions, see Shan Man, *Baxian zhuan shuo yu xinyang*, pp. 261-273. Regarding Lü Dongbin and the Yellow Crane Tower, see Zhu Yueli, *Daojiao kaoxin ji*, pp. 457-458, 481.

⁴⁹ This poem was also included in the *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, *juan* 258, p. 5706 (in the *Sikuquanshu*, accessed through Erudition database).

黃鶴樓前吹笛時，白蘋紅蕖滿江湄。

Playing the flute in front of the Yellow Crane Tower, the river edge brims with white duckweed and red reeds.

衷情慾訴誰能會，惟有清風明月知。

Who could fathom my inner feelings and desires? Only the cool breeze and the bright moon know.

In the following chapter of *Tale of the Flying Sword*, Lü Dongbin arrives at Yueyang, and once more is disheartened to discover that no one recognizes him. Thus, he writes this poem on the Yueyang Tower:

徐步岳陽樓上頭，四圍山色擁皇州。

I stroll to the top of Yueyang Tower, the mountain colors envelop Huangzhou in the four directions.

莫言笑語驚天地，且看闌桿逼斗牛。

Do not say that my laughter and chatter startles heaven and earth, just look at the balustrade pole closing in on the fighting bulls.

蘆渚兩三聲牧笛，柳溪四五個沙鷗。

My flute herds the reeds on the bank in two-three sounds, by the rivulet willow, four-five sandy gulls.

分明一段蕭湘景，萬頃煙波足勝遊。

Distinguishing a section of Xiaoxiang scenery, the mist-covered water over a vast landscape is enough to triumph travel.

The problem of recognizing Lü Dongbin is perhaps the most frequently recurring motif in the many anecdotes, tales, and poems about the immortal since the Song. In late-Ming works, Lü disguises himself but leaves behind various clues about his true identity. Recognizing Lü is not only regarded as a badge of honor, but also a token that proves the readability and adequacy of the observer to be initiated into the Way, to receive instructions and teachings from Lü. In chapter 10 of *Tale of the Flying Sword*, Dongbin is frustrated by the people of Yueyang, who fail to recognize him on three occasions:

朝遊北海暮蒼梧，袖裡青蛇膽氣粗。

三醉岳陽人不識，朗然飛過洞庭湖。

In the morning I travel to Beihai, in the evening to Cangwu, courageous and irascible, a green snake in my sleeve.⁵⁰

Thrice I was intoxicated in Yueyang [but] no one recognized me, thus I fly across Dongting Lake.

This poem is one of the oldest and most famous poems attributed to Lü Dongbin. Slightly different versions of this poem were recorded in the *Mengzhai bitan* 蒙齋筆談 and the *Yang wengong tanyuan* 楊文公談苑, according to which this poem was inscribed on the Yueyang Tower itself and was very popular during the Northern Song.⁵¹ During the Ming, this poem appeared in several poetry anthologies and was included in the Daoist canon.⁵² The appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* includes this version:

朝遊蓬島暮蒼梧，袖裡青蛇膽氣粗。

三至岳陽人不識，吟詩飛過洞庭湖。

In the morning I travel to Penglai Island, in the evening to Cangwu, courageous and irascible, a green dragon in my sleeve.

Thrice I arrived at Yueyang [but] no one recognized me, singing a song I fly across Dongting Lake.

Surprisingly, the only one who does recognize him in Yueyang is a tree spirit:⁵³

⁵⁰ The “green snake” refers to one of Lü Dongbin’s swords – a short sword, similar to a dagger, that according to legend he carried within his sleeve. According to Baldrian-Hussein, in Song sources this double-edged dagger was associated with medicine and exorcism, having healing properties and the ability to ward off calamities. According to one legend, the sword was originally a huge snake which Lü Dongbin encountered in Yueyang and coaxed it into his sleeve, transforming it into a dagger. See Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-bin in Northern Sung Literature,” pp. 140-142.

⁵¹ See Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-bin in Northern Sung Literature,” p. 158.

⁵² See *Sandong qunxian lu* 三洞群仙錄 (DZ 1248), *Yueyang fu tu ji* 岳陽府土記, *Yuan qu xuan* 元曲選, *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, among others.

⁵³ A different version of this poem appeared in Song sources, and different variations of it later appeared in Ming anthologies, such as the Wanli-era collection *Yuan qu xuan* 元曲選. Baldrian-Hussein discusses several Song-era legends and poems about Lü Dongbin’s famous sojourn in Yueyang; see Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-bin in

獨自行來獨自坐，獨自吟來獨自坐。

Alone I wander, alone I sit, alone I come
chanting, alone I sit.

惟有城南柳樹精，分明知我神仙過。

Only a willow-tree spirit by the southern wall
recognizes that I am a divine immortal
passing through.

This recurring motif of the itinerant immortal, and the failure of those he encounters to recognize his true identity, is a key feature in the poems Lü Dongbin inscribes on walls, which is the subject of the next section.

4. The Writing is on the Wall: Lü Dongbin's *tibishi*

The physical presence of Lü Dongbin's poems is an important recurrent theme in his legend. The words of the immortal are not ephemeral, but given a lasting corporeal existence by being recorded on paper, wood, and stone by Lü's own hand. Legends of Lü Dongbin often describe him writing poems on walls of various structures, from taverns and local businesses, famous towers and pavilions, to temples, monasteries, and huts of recluses.⁵⁴ This motif accompanies the Lü Dongbin lore since its earliest stages; poems inscribed on walls of temples were attributed to Lü as early as the tenth century.⁵⁵ This aspect of his legend became especially prominent in late Ming, when it was featured in *biji*, literary anthologies, and narrative texts. The abovementioned *Lüzü zhi*, for instance, contains numerous poems that are said to have been inscribed by Lü

Northern Sung Literature,” pp. 156-158. This poem also appears in the *Lüzü zhi*, *juan* 4, under the title “Leisurely Inscribed” (*xianti* 闲题).

⁵⁴ Sources since the Song show Lü Dongbin inscribing poems on the walls of not just Daoist temples, but Buddhist temples as well.

⁵⁵ Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature,” p. 138.

Dongbin on walls of temples and other sites.⁵⁶ The appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* records sets of couplets penned by Lü that were inscribed on six temple halls.⁵⁷ Why did this notion of Lü Dongbin inscribing poems on walls attract this much interest in late-imperial China? How did this trait contribute to Lü Dongbin's hagiographic *imaginaire* in late Ming?

Poetry inscribed on walls (*tibishi* 題壁詩) emerged as a literary subgenre in China during the Six Dynasties period, but it only came into vogue during the Tang. As Yan Jihua shows, Tang-dynasty *tibishi* covered a wide range of themes and styles; as a subgenre, they are grouped together not so much for their content or form, as for their method of production.⁵⁸ In late-imperial China, the poems inscribed on walls that attracted the most attention were incorporated into anthologies and collections of anecdotes. The writers of *tibishi* were often obscure poets, many of whom were women. In time, *tibishi* also developed a close connection with ghost writing, that is, writing attributed to the spirits of the dead; in anecdotes, these poems penned by the dead are often revealed through spirit writing.⁵⁹

Particularly in the Ming and Qing dynasties, *tibishi* emerged as a subgenre of travel literature. For Ming- and Qing-era literati, writing poems on walls during the course of their journeys became an inseparable part of their travel experience. Hence it is no surprise that the

⁵⁶ These poems are included in the first section of *Lüzū zhi*; Boltz noted that they serve as a kind of prelude to the verses included in the second section, "literary writings." See Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature*, p. 143.

⁵⁷ These halls are the Hall of Ascending to Immortality (昇仙樓), the Jade Emperor Chamber (玉皇閣), the Three Pure-Ones Hall (三清殿), Penglai Scenery Hall (蓬萊景), Welcoming Immortals Hall (迎仙亭), and the Clear and Cool Hermitage (清涼庵). Since no specific location is mentioned in the appendix, and considering that the names of these halls are extremely generic, so far I have not been able to establish where they were located during the time of publication in the early years of the seventeenth century. It is most likely, however, that they were located in the vicinity of Jianyang, where this work was published and where Yu Xiangdou's social network was centered.

⁵⁸ Yan Jihua 嚴紀華, *Tangdai tibishi zhi yanjiu* 唐代題壁詩之研究 (Beijing: Hua Mulan wenhua chubanshe, 2008).

⁵⁹ Judith Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses: Writing on Walls and Anxieties of Loss," in *Writing and Materiality in China*, pp. 74-80.

most common sites of *tibishi* were waystations that served travelers, such as taverns, inns, courier stations, and temples.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the *tibishi* that literati left behind later shaped the experience of other travelers who visited that place, and even prompted the composition of new poems from these traveling reader-viewers, thus potentially beginning an infinite chain of poetic responses.

Wall poetry embodies an intimate connection between a person and a place at a specific moment in time. As Judith Zeitlin notes, the fact that *tibishi* are something permanent that a person leaves behind at a certain place grants it both a spatial and a temporal dimension.⁶¹ Zeitlin further defines writing poetry on walls in the Chinese tradition as “writing *in place*,” which she describes as “a legitimate cultural practice in which individuals left inscriptions on the walls of public buildings (mainly temples, inns, taverns, courier stations, and government offices) – written mementos, which sometimes could not only enhance the cultural value of a spot but even put it on the map.”⁶² Moreover, wall poetry remains, at least theoretically, defined by its connection to a specific site, and this association accompanies the poem even as it is reproduced in print and read in situations far removed in time and place from its original site. Thus, when reading a *tibishi* – regardless of format, place, and time – the reader is expected to imagine the original moment of poetic creation at that site, to relive that act of writing.⁶³

⁶⁰ Judith Zeitlin, “Disappearing Verses,” pp. 86-90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶³ Interestingly, this imagined connection to a specific place and time shapes the experience of reading a *tibishi* in printed form even if it was never inscribed on a wall. In other words, a poem that is framed as a *tibishi* although it was never inscribed on a wall is still read in the same fashion, by imagining a certain situation; the effect on the reader remains the same.

Writing poetry on walls is, somewhat paradoxically, both a personal, intimate act, and a public performance of communication and self-marketing. The physical presence of a *tibishi* in a site that is intentionally exposed to any viewer undoubtedly places it within the public domain. Since *tibishi* were meant to be read by occasional passers-by of diverse backgrounds, they often employed a simpler language and incorporated fewer allusions than other types of poetry.⁶⁴ As mentioned above, the sites of *tibishi* could become a nexus of inter-personal communication between travelers. Nevertheless, *tibishi* are also regarded as a spontaneous, personal experience, wherein the poet leaves a part of himself or herself behind. One's intimate feelings and thoughts are not only expressed in the content of the poem, but the writer's own selfhood and corporeal existence are poured into the act of inscribing a poem on a wall.⁶⁵ In a famous *ci* verse titled "Feeling Sentimental on a Spring Evening" (*chunwan ganhuai* 春晚感懷), the Southern Song poet Wu Wenying 吳文英 (circa 1200-1260) writes in nostalgic rumination about the experience of writing a *tibishi*: "it was as if in the black tower, facing a departure, I inscribed a poem on a dilapidated wall, my tears melded with the ink, [lamenting] the wretched tranquility of the world of dust" (青樓彷彿, 臨分敗壁題詩, 淚墨慘澹塵土).⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Zeiltin, "Disappearing Verses," p. 76. See also Luo Zongtao 羅宗濤, "Tangren tibishi chutan" 唐人題壁詩初探 (*Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 47, 1991); Wu Chengxue 吳承學, "Lun tibishi: jianji xiangguan de shige zhizuo yu chuanbo xingshi" 論題壁詩—兼即相關的詩歌製作與傳播形式 (*Wenxue yichan* no. 4:13, 1994).

⁶⁵ Zeiltin discusses a poem by a certain "girl from Kuaiji," discovered in Shandong in 1618, in which the poetess describes her pain as physically manifested in the poem she writes on a wall, whose lines were inscribed by the thousand tears she had shed. See Zeiltin, "Disappearing Verses," pp. 91-93. Wai-yee Li mentions cases wherein women who were abducted during the Ming-Qing transition inscribe poems on walls by using their own blood; see Wai-yee Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), pp. 477-479.

⁶⁶ Wu Wenying 吳文英, *Meng chuang gao* 夢窗稿, p. 19 (Ming print; accessed through Erudition database). I thank Professor Wai-yee Li for alerting my attention to this poem.

After the fall of the Ming dynasty, *tibishi* were also used as a medium to express one's feelings, communicate one's perilous situation, and mourn loved ones and a world that is forever lost. In her study of women, writing, and national trauma in the Ming-Qing transition, Wai-ye Li discusses poems inscribed on walls by women who were abducted during the turmoil of war.⁶⁷ Although these *tibishi* communicate a very personal trauma and record an individual's perilous situation, the public format of these poems on walls also allows the writer to make broader judgments and statements about politics and society, while at the same time it leaves the poetess herself exposed to judgment and scrutiny. Yet the act of writing poetry on walls, as a form of self-revelation, also represents an aspiration for deliverance. Moreover, the merging of personal misfortunes and political crises in these poems mirrors the collapse of boundaries between the private and public that is inherent in *tibishi* as a subgenre.⁶⁸

Wall poetry became an important aspect of the legend of Lü Dongbin from its earliest stages; in fact, the rise of *tibishi* as a subgenre during the Tang corresponded to the inception of the Lü Dongbin lore. Yan Jihua lists twenty-three poems attributed to Lü Dongbin that are said to date from the Tang.⁶⁹ In Yan's examination, Lü Dongbin appears as a late-Tang poet and the only one who is designated a "Daoist" (*daoshi* 道士) among the poets she lists.⁷⁰ Yan places these poems under different categories: six fall under Yan's category of "landscape wall-poems"

⁶⁷ Wai-ye Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), pp. 391-479. The authenticity of these poems is often difficult to substantiate; many of them seem to have been fabricated by male authors. Li also analyzes two antecedents from the Song dynasty of poems that are said to have been inscribed on walls by women of distinction who were abducted during wartime. *Ibid.*, p. 394.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 429-450.

⁶⁹ Yan Jihua, *Tangdai tibishi zhi yanjiu*, pp. 141-142. Interestingly, Yan makes a distinction between Lü Dongbin and Lü Yan in chapter 6, but refers to him as one and the same person in chapter 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

(*jijing* 即景), seven under “leisure wall-poems” (*xianshi tibishi* 閒適題壁詩),⁷¹ one poem of “irony” (*fenglun* 諷論), four of “sentiment / feeling” (*ganshang* 感傷), and five poems of “correspondence” (*jiaoji* 交際).⁷²

Song-era sources record numerous poems supposedly inscribed by Lü Dongbin on walls. Baldrian-Hussein translated two poems that are said to have been written on the walls of a certain temple called Tianqing guan 天慶觀 (though Song sources place it in different locations), wherein Lü Dongbin reflects on his Daoist cultivation practices and the temple’s serene atmosphere.⁷³ In Song anecdotes, the poems that Lü inscribes on walls as he travels often contain hints of his name and clues to alert viewer-readers as to his true identity. In addition, Lü Dongbin’s writing on walls has a miraculous effect on the place and its people; for instance, Lü’s inscriptions on the wall of shops and taverns are said to have brought immense prosperity to their owners.⁷⁴ Thus, it is not only the memory of the immortal that he leaves behind on the wall, but also a part of his celestial presence – a thaumaturgic blessing.

In late Ming anthologies and narrative texts, the poems that Lü Dongbin ascribes on walls primarily discuss spiritual attainment and Lü’s life as a Daoist adept and later an immortal. The issue of recognizing Lü underlies most *tibishi* attributed to him. These verses are highly communicative; they are not intent on expressing emotion for its own sake or using poetry for self-examination, but rather seem to be wholly devoted to transmitting messages to the would-be

⁷¹ Poems in this category celebrate the serenity and love of nature of the poet in leisure, encompassing a range of topics, including the natural landscape, village life, wine, and ruminations about spiritual enlightenment. Ibid, pp. 142-154

⁷² Ibid, p. 213.

⁷³ Baldrian-Hussein, “Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature,” p. 138-139.

⁷⁴ Ang, “Le Culte de Lü Dongbin,” pp. 494-495.

viewer-readers. In other words, the immortal is not engrossed in self-reflection, but rather in conveying information to his future audiences. This focus on communication rather than on introspective reflections while writing about oneself is in keeping with the public and corporeal features of the practice of writing on walls, a practice that is concomitantly personal and impersonal.

The aforementioned *Tale of the Flying Sword*, the longest narrative hagiography of Lü Dongbin, includes *tibishi* attributed to him in almost every chapter, corresponding to the specific stage in his life story. In chapter 4, Lü receives a pair of swords from the mysterious Fire-Dragon Perfected (*huolong zhenren* 火龍真人) of Mount Lu that has the power to cut down greed, lust, and anxiety. Soon Lü gets a chance to use these swords to defeat a dragon and a tiger, an obvious allusion to the duality of yin-yang in inner alchemical practice. Later in the chapter, while visiting the temple Zhenji guan 真寂觀 on Mount Heng 衡山, Lü Dongbin encounters a Daoist adept who inquires about his swords and realizes from his appearance that Lü must be an immortal. This understanding rendered this Daoist worthy of instruction in Lü's eyes, so he uses one of his swords to carve this poem on the wall of the temple:⁷⁵

欲整鋒鋸敢憚勞，凌晨開匣玉龍嗥。

Desire [lies] entirely on the tip of a sword,
daring to dread its labor, daybreak opens a
box of jade-dragon's wails.

手中氣概冰三尺，石上精神蛇一條。

My manner lies within my palm [like] three-
chi long ice, the essence of a divine snake
coils on a rock.

好血默隨流水盡，兇豪今逐漬痕銷。

Good blood silently follows the flowing water
until it is exhausted, the fierce and grand
today closes the soaked scars one by one.

⁷⁵ This poem also appears in the second *juan* of *Lüzü zhi* and in the *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, *juan* 258, p. 5706 (in the *Sikuquanshu* through Erudition database).

削平浮世不平事，與爾相將上九霄。

To pare the unfair matters of this world,
together with you we shall rise to the ninth
heaven.

As Lü finishes inscribing this poem, the ink in the characters shines so brilliantly that they are seen even on the other side of the wall. The Daoist bows again in reverence and Lü Dongbin reveals to him the difference between the Sword of the Dao (*daojian* 道劍), which allows him to enter and exit the formless, and the Sword of Method (*fajian* 法劍), which allows him to subjugate demons and dispel evil spirits.

In chapter 8 of *Tale of the Flying Sword*, Lü inscribes a poem on the wall of a temple that he visited in order to reprimand its negligent abbot and alert him to the unique opportunity he missed to encounter and learn from the immortal:⁷⁶

丹房有門出不鑰，見個仙童露雙腳。

The cinnabar chamber has a door but no key
to exit it, [I] see the immortal novice baring
two feet.

問伊經堂何寂寥，道是虛空也不著。

I asked him why the scripture hall is desolate,
he replied that there is no need – it is [always]
empty.

聞此語，何欣欣？主翁豈是尋常人。

[When] I heard these words, how could I be
happy? Is the abbot seeking ordinary men?

我來謁見不得見，渴心耿耿生埃塵。

I came to visit but did not see him, his thirsty
soul is devoted to the life in the world of dust.

歸去也，波浩渺，路入蓬萊山杳杳。

I went back, the waves were great and vast,
taking the path to enter the deep and somber
Penglai Mount.

相思一上石樓時，雪晴海闊千峰曉。

As I was contemplating rising to the top of
the rock-tower, dawn engulfed a thousand
peaks of clear snow and vast seas.

⁷⁶ This poem also appears with minor variation in the *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, juan 259, p. 5712 (in the *Sikuquanshu* through Erudition database) and in several Qing-era poetry anthologies.

Alas, most of the people Lü Dongbin encounters in his many journeys fail to recognize him as an immortal or seize on the opportunity to receive instruction from him. More often than not, the poems he inscribes on walls convey his disappointment – and admonishment of these people – after such encounters. He inscribes this poem in chapter 10 of *Tale of the Flying Sword* during his sojourn in Yueyang, where no one recognized him, not even a local official with whom he had personal exchanges. Only a tree-spirit realized that he is an immortal:

仙籍班班有姓名，蓬萊倦客呂先生。

凡夫肉眼知多少，不及城南老樹精。

The immortal registry carries my name, [I am] master Lü, the weary visitor of Penglai. How much can your common eyes of flesh recognize? They do not compare with the old tree-spirit of the South Wall.⁷⁷

How do these poems, supposedly inscribed on walls by Lü Dongbin, differ from the rest of the corpus attributed to the immortal? What do they contribute to his hagiographic *imaginaire*? Broadly speaking, when it comes to *tibishi*, it is the writer, rather than the poem itself, who is at the center of attention. The practice of inscribing writing on a permanent structure reveals an attempt on the part of the author to leave something of his self behind. It is not only a form of communication with an unknown occasional audience, but also a way to substantiate one's existence in the world through the act of writing (or substantiating the lore of a cult figure). In this sense, the notion of writing on walls instills a sense of corporeal presence of the writer at a certain site; even if one later reads the poem in a printed format in an anthology, far away from the site itself, the poem is still read with that situation in mind – the reader is expected to imagine the immortal in his act of writing in that place and time, while also taking

⁷⁷ This poem is also quoted in the Ming dynasty Longqing-era (1567-1572) local gazetteer *Yuezhou fuzhi* 岳州府志, *juan* 17, p. 264 (through Erudition database).

into account the viewer-readers that followed and transcribed the poem. Lü Dongbin's *tibishi* therefore convey the immediacy and spontaneity in the act of writing, bringing the immortal closer to the reader. Imagining Lü inscribing these poems in a specific place and time, and visualizing oneself viewing the immortal's own calligraphy with one's own eyes, play an even larger part in the reception of these poems than their content or style.

The corporeal manifestation of Lü Dongbin in his own writing is also believed to have miraculous and healing powers, due to its intimate link to the immortal. Sources as early as the Song record that Lü Dongbin's calligraphy had apotropaic powers.⁷⁸ Near the end of the tenth century, according to Zhang Shunmin 张舜民 (*jinshi* 1065), Lü Dongbin inscribed two poems on the door of the temple Tianqing guan 天慶觀, which were later copied on stone tablets and placed in the western porch of the temple. According to Zhang, people of the area scraped the ink out of the inscription on the wooden door and used the shavings to cure illnesses.⁷⁹ Almost a century later, another source reports that the wood of the door on which Lü inscribed these poems was pierced through due to the frequent scraping of the characters by visitors.⁸⁰ These beliefs in the otherworldly powers of Lü's writing further highlight the notion that the immortal's writing is somehow identified with his person, that it is imbued with his presence. His writing is not only regarded as a product of his genius, but as a part of himself, a manifestation of his very existence.

⁷⁸ Katz, *Images of the Immortal*, p. 59; Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," pp. 140-141.

⁷⁹ Ibid. See Zhang Shunmin 张舜民, *Huaman ji* 畫墁集 (accessed through Erudition database), juan 8, pp. 39-40. Lü Dongbin was also the patron saint of ink-sellers. Anecdotes from the Song mention that he sometimes traveled disguised as an ink-seller and was known as the "Ink-Immortal." See Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," p. 145-146.

⁸⁰ This appears in the *Jile pian* 鸡肋篇 (1133) by Zhuang Chuo 庄綽. See Baldrian-Hussein, "Lü Tung-pin in Northern Sung literature," p. 141.

5. The Immortal's Voice: Spirit Writing in the Lü Dongbin lore

Unlike the abovementioned *tibishi* that are believed to have been inscribed by Lü himself, most of the writing that was attributed to Lü Dongbin in late-imperial China comes down to us through the practice of spirit writing. Encountering and communicating with the immortal, either directly or via mediums, has also been an important aspect of the Lü Dongbin lore and cult since its inception. In fact, the first records of spirit writing in the cult of Lü Dongbin during the Song correlate the emergence of this practice in general. Kleeman traces the first indisputable reference to the practice of spirit writing to the tenth century.⁸¹ Song sources reveal that spirit writing was used already during the Northern Song to communicate with Lü. Anecdotes included in the *Yijianzhi* 夷堅志 recount cases from the Northern Song in which Lü revealed himself to mediums and transmitted messages, Daoist teachings, and inner-alchemical poems to them.⁸² The earliest extant self-account or “autobiography” of Lü Dongbin in the abovementioned Song-dynasty *Nenggai zhai manlu* 能改齋漫錄 is recorded as having been revealed by Lü through spirit writing.⁸³

Spirit writing gained substantial traction during the Ming and Qing dynasties, particularly among literati. In tandem with the growing popularity of spirit writing in general, during this period the practice of spirit writing became so deeply associated with Lü Dongbin and his writing, that many of the works that were previously attributed to him were later labeled

⁸¹ Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale*, p. 8. While some scholars trace the origins of spirit writing in China to the first centuries AD, Kleeman offers a more cautious hypothesis regarding the emergence of this practice.

⁸² Ang, “Le Culte de Lü Dongbin,” pp. 484-485.

⁸³ Ang, “Le Culte de Lü Dongbin,” p. 484.

“revealed texts” and retroactively said to have been transmitted through spirit writing.⁸⁴ This trend further intensified during the Qing and reached its zenith with the publication of the Daoist encyclopedia *Daozang jiyao*, which branded an unprecedented number of Lü Dongbin’s writings (drawn from earlier collections such as *Lüzu quanshu*) as having been revealed through spirit writing.⁸⁵

The growing popularity of spirit writing in general during the Ming and Qing and its intensifying uses in the Lü Dongbin cult not only underline the centrality of writing in reaching out to the otherworldly, but also speaks to Lü Dongbin’s role as a god of literature of sorts in the eyes of late-imperial literati. As a form of interpersonal communication with otherworldly beings like immortals and deities, spirit writing is based on the understanding that the immortal or deity was indeed real and that he or she could be present. The general view of this practice among literati was that one could develop interpersonal relationships, even genuine friendships, with the immortal or deity on the other side of the brush through the composition of poetry.⁸⁶ This relationship was regarded differently from the reverential awe one would harbor towards other gods and immortals; instead, it resembled much more a friendship with a fellow human literatus. Russell aptly termed this type of inter-realm friendship mediated by writing as “transcendental camaraderies.”⁸⁷ Writing, especially the writing of poetry, was thus understood to form a

⁸⁴ Zhu Yueli, *Daojiao kao xin ji*, pp. 220-226.

⁸⁵ Ma Xiaohong 马晓宏, “Daozang dengzhu ben suo shou Lü Dongbin shumu jianzhu: Lü Dongbin zhuzuo kao lue zhiyi” 道藏等诸本所收吕洞宾书目简注: 吕洞宾著作考略之一 (*Zhongguo Daojiao*, no. 3, 1988), pp. 35-37.

⁸⁶ Terrence Russell, “Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo: a spirit writing cult in late Ming China” (*Asiatische Studien*, no. 4, 1990), pp. 107-140.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 133.

personal connection between those in the “world of dust” and those who had freed themselves from it.

One telling example from late Ming is an account by Yao Lü 姚旅 in the *Lueshu* 露書, according to which Zhu Ding 朱鼎 once requested a couplet for his study from Lü Dongbin through spirit writing, which he provided.⁸⁸ A certain friend by the name of Chen Jiushu 陳九敘 was skeptical about it, and so they summoned Lü Dongbin once more, and this time the immortal divulged to Chen information about the imperial examinations. When Chen took the examinations, the topic that Lü mentioned was indeed included in the test, as predicted.⁸⁹

In the aforementioned appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, spirit writing emerges as the main instrument of recording Lü Dongbin’s poems, couplets, and essays. Seventeen poems in the appendix are clearly noted as having been revealed, with the character *shi* 示 followed by the name of the person who received it. A total of twelve individuals are mentioned by name in the appendix as the recipients of Lü’s revealed messages.⁹⁰ The surnames of Yu, Zhang, and Feng appear several times; although these are common surnames, it is not unlikely that they were kinsmen. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any information on these individuals. It seems that none of them were *jinshi* or held official posts, nor did they leave behind any writings of their

⁸⁸ The couplet read: 懶築土牆怕風月怪吾拘束, 剪開蓬□放江山入我情懷.

⁸⁹ See Yao Lü 姚旅, *Lueshu* 露書, *juan* 13, p. 225 (accessed through Erudition database). Regarding spirit writing in the Lü Dongbin cult during the Qing, see Zhu Yueli, *Daojiao kao xin ji*, pp. 220-226.

⁹⁰ They are: Zhang Junxi 張君熹 (appears multiple times), Zhang Rixi 張日熹 (appears multiple times), Zhang Xiangzhen 張象貞 (appears multiple times), Zhang Gongyin 張拱寅, Zhang Shiyin 張失寅, Zhang Daohuang 張道光, Chen Shoumo 陳守默, Wu Xiaochan 吳小蟾, Feng Tingji 馮廷紀, Feng Yingyuan 馮應元, Yu Shengwang 余生望, and Ji Xi 戡熙. Three other persons are mentioned in the essays attributed to Lü in the appendix as patrons of his cult: Feng Jundou 馮君鬥, Feng Junyi 馮君意, and Yu Jia 余嘉.

own. We are left to speculate: relatives and friends of the publisher of this work, Yu Xiangdou, perhaps? Devout patrons of the Lü Dongbin cult? Or both?

6. Conclusions

Lü Dongbin's writings about himself hold a special place in the immense corpus attributed to him. Lü Dongbin's prose portrayals of his life's trajectory and his journeys in the immortals' paradises, and the numerous poems celebrating his carefree life as an immortal, provide different avenues for self-representation. Two contending visions of Lü Dongbin run through these prose and poetry jottings about himself: the first is an ascetic, saint-like master of Daoist inner alchemical cultivation, whereas the other is a jocund libertine who enjoys to the full the pleasures of the human and the celestial realms, associating with commoners and writing poems in a drunken stupor.⁹¹ Regardless of how they present Lü, the immortal's own voice gives his words a unique sense of spontaneity and authenticity in depicting himself and his life, two vital components in autobiographical writing in China, particularly autobiographical poetry.⁹² The framing of Lü's self-accounts and poems as having been inscribed by Lü's own hand on walls (*tibishi*) or as messages revealed through spirit writing further enhances their claim for authenticity and their sense of spontaneity.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Lü Dongbin's writings about himself in the origin narratives *Tale of the Eight Immortals* and *Tale of the Flying Sword* blur the boundaries between author and protagonist. Here, Lü Dongbin – the subject of the book – joins the retelling of his

⁹¹ Both visions existed in some capacity side-by-side in the Lü Dongbin lore since the Song. See Ang, "Le Culte de Lü Dongbin sous le Song du Sud," pp. 497-501. Paul Katz discusses the conflation of these two visions of Lü Dongbin in the hagiographical murals of the Yongle-gong temple; see Katz, *Images of the Immortal*, pp. 246-247.

⁹² Owen, "The Self's Perfect Mirror," p. 75.

own life story by supplementing the narrative (composed by the author) with prose and lyrical depictions of himself and his life. In other words, he becomes a co-author of his own hagiography. This feature not only helps to legitimize the hagiographic narrative, but also grants it a sense of immediacy and directness. However, in what way are these writings “autobiographical”? In what sense are they “writing about the self”? And above all, what is this “self” in Lü Dongbin’s self-accounts?

The short essays attributed to Lü that were included in late Ming anthologies and narrative texts, such as *Liizu zhi* and the appendix of the *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, provide a mere summary of Lü Dongbin’s lore, briefly discussing the main aspects of his legendary figure: his ancestry and origins, a few famous milestones in his hagiography, and his iconography. Lü does not describe in these short essays the hardships that he had endured, any anxiety or disappointment he felt about his failed attempts to pass the examinations, his internal struggles, or his reflections about the Daoist path he had chosen. Moreover, he does not discuss personal relationships or social attachments of any kind.

Although these prose and verse portrayals of Lü Dongbin assume his own voice, they are anything but revelatory. Furthermore, they do not create a narrative of his life story – there is no sense of progression, no real development. Not only that, but in summarizing his life – or rather persona – Lü does not delve into self-examination and shows no sign of self-doubt, remorse, or even gratification with his life’s trajectory.⁹³ In these respects, Lü Dongbin’s self-accounts stand in stark contrast to late-Ming (mortal) autobiographical writing that was used mainly as a

⁹³ It is somewhat ironic that Lü Dongbin does not embark on any self-examination or self-criticism in his writings about himself, considering that he plays a major role in various types of didactic, moralizing works, from Quanzhen tracts to *shanshu* books. Could this lack of self-reflexivity stand as a token of Lü’s perfect moral record? His own lore attests against this possibility, as Lü Dongbin is famed for his indulgence in worldly pleasures.

platform for introspective self-examination and self-criticism.⁹⁴ By contrast, Lü Dongbin's gaze is not turned inwards, but rather outwards. Similarly to an actor's self-presentation as he comes up on stage, it is us, the readers-viewers-worshippers, who are the true focus of this presentation, not the figure who speaks. If autobiography is defined as the creation of a narrative of one's life that provides a space for introspection, then Lü Dongbin's writings about himself cannot be regarded as autobiographic at all. If so, what are they?

Under the guise of giving us an intimate view of Lü's biography and life experience, these "autobiographical" jottings perhaps render the immortal more accessible, but less human – they draw an image of the immortal as a perfected being, not as a man who *became* an immortal. Instead of humanizing him, these self-accounts further deify him. They are, in other words, a hagiographical device. They paint a persona, not a person.

What, then, is their significance? What role do they play in constructing Lü Dongbin's hagiographic *imaginaire*? It is the presence of Lü Dongbin in the world at large and in his writings in particular that plays the central role in his lore and reverence. It is not his attributes or his personal history that is at stake here; it is the very act of *being* Lü Dongbin. The importance of his self-accounts lies less in the narrative they convey (his numerous hagiographies, dramas, and popular narratives fulfill this role better) than in the very fact that it is Lü Dongbin himself who transmits them. The writings attributed to him serve as "traces" of the immortal, remnants of his existence that are cherished for this reason by his many followers, as they provide them with a roadmap of sorts to the immortal himself. Lü's cultic worship was closely tied to the "traces" of the immortal since the Song; as Ang argues, it is the presence of Lü at a certain place

⁹⁴ As Pei-yi Wu demonstrated, the late Ming was not only a highpoint of autobiographical writing in China, but it was particularly noted for its emphasis on self-examination. See Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress*, pp. 71-159.

and the poems that he inscribed there that provided the rationale for erecting a temple in his honor at that locale.⁹⁵ For this reason, it is not surprising that the challenge of recognizing Lü underlies his writings. The problem of recognizing the immortal reflects an enduring aspiration among literati to meet the immortal face to face and be wise enough, spiritually advanced enough, to recognize him for who and what he is, thus proving oneself worthy of his instruction.

Herein lies the great attraction of Lü Dongbin's wall poetry, or *tibishi*: not only does the fact that he inscribed these poems with his own hand grant them miraculous and healing powers, but its moment of inscription – of Lü Dongbin being at a specific site at a specific time – is carried into the experience of reading these poems and imbues them with new meaning. This is also the reason for the centrality of spirit writing in the corpus attributed to Lü Dongbin. Spirit writing brings the immortal even closer to his reader-worshippers, who take an active role in communicating with Lü and transmitting or interpreting his messages, translating them into poetry and prose. The practice of spirit writing allows them to develop friendships, “transcendental camaraderies” through which they share with Lü Dongbin their passion for writing. The writings attributed to Lü join the countless stories about his travels in the human world and his encounters with people of all social groups across China in promoting an image of Lü Dongbin as accessible, as an immortal of this world, the “people's immortal” as Ang phrases it.⁹⁶ His cult and lore is unique in its private aspect and emphasis on interpersonal relationships. What is at stake in the writings attributed to Lü Dongbin is gaining a personal connection with him, communicating with him; it is the prospect of personally encountering the immortal,

⁹⁵ See Ang, “Le Culte de Lü Dongbin sous le Song du Sud,” pp. 480-481.

⁹⁶ Ang, “Le Culte de Lü Dongbin sous le Song du Sud,” p. 501.

whether directly or through his recorded voice, that motivates his readers, worshipers, and shadow-writers.

Unlike literati writing about themselves and their own lives, in the case of Lü Dongbin, the responsibility of crafting an authentic and accurate portrayal of the immortal in aesthetically captivating writing falls to his followers and shadow-writers. Nevertheless, it is not for the sole purpose of transmitting information that one composes and reads Lü Dongbin's supposedly-autobiographical essays and poems. Rather, these writings allow the reader-worshipers and shadow-writers of Lü to transcend their mundane life in the "world of dust" and revel in the joys of immortal life. Lü's writings about himself do not present an opportunity to humanize Lü Dongbin, but rather to allow his reader-worshipers and shadow-writers to gaze beyond the confines of mortal, social life, to regard the world anew from the point of view of eternity. Assuming the voice of the immortal provides them with a chance to momentarily ascend to his world of carefree roaming and eternal bliss.

Chapter 5:

Through the Gates of Hell: Netherworld Journeys in Origin Narratives

1. Introduction	273
2. Origin Narratives and Hell in Late-Ming Writing	277
3. The Demon-Queller Zhong Kui Inspects Hell	283
4. The Saintly Sa Shoujian Redeems Souls in Fengdu	294
5. The Mischievous Huaguang Disrupts Hell	302
6. Visuality of Hell	309
7. Conclusions	315

1. Introduction

The popular fascination with the world of the dead reached unprecedented heights in late Ming. An unending reservoir of moral indoctrination weaving horror and humor, the mechanisms of karmic retribution and the tortures of hell permeated popular culture around the turn of the seventeenth century. The netherworld was a favorite theme in everything from narrative texts and dramas, through religious reverence and ritual, to visual and material cultures.¹ The commercial publishing industry was both impacted by this growing interest in the netherworld and fueled it further, its products increasingly shaping the imagination and discourse of the afterlife. The popularity and wide circulation of commercially-printed narrative texts and dramas made them a particularly effective vehicle for propagating a view of the netherworld that relies

¹ In this chapter, I use the terms “realm of the dead,” “netherworld,” “hell,” and “purgatory” interchangeably, taking my cue from late-Ming narrative texts wherein no real distinction was made between terms such as “earth prison” (*diyu* 地獄), the “realm of yin” (*yinsi* 陰司 and *yinzhai* 陰宅), the “dark world” (*mingjian* 冥間 and *mingfu* 冥府), and Fengdu 豐都, as I mention below.

on the notion of the Three Teachings, drawing tropes and imagery from Buddhism and Daoism while promoting Confucian ideals of morality, particularly filial piety and chastity.

Hagiographic narrative writing not only seized upon this interest in hell, but explored the landscape and function of the netherworld to such an extent that it should be regarded as the pinnacle of this trend. While the vast majority of late-Ming works only described descents to hell in brief, some origin narratives included long, detailed tours of the netherworld. Entertaining and unabashedly didactic, these underworld tours serve several crucial narrative functions in origin narratives, and are key to understanding this unique genre. This chapter examines the trope of journeys through hell in origin narratives by focusing on three case studies: the origin narratives of the demon-queller Zhong Kui, the Daoist saint Sa Shoujian, and Huaguang (Wutong). Each of these cases reveals another aspect of the late-Ming fascination with the netherworld and the role of origin narratives in fueling this chthonic interest. Moreover, they provide another vision of travel – *you* 游 – in a genre that is already profoundly marked by the act of journeying. The final section of this chapter examines the visuality of journeys through hell in origin narratives, situating them vis-à-vis the rich visual tradition of the netherworld in Chinese history.

Journeys to the netherworld in origin narratives are indebted to a long tradition of storytelling and art portraying humans descending to hell. We find records of hell journeys already in the first centuries AD in anthologies of *zhiguai* stories and miracle tales such as the *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記 and *Youming lu* 幽明錄.² In these records, the traveler to hell is an ordinary person who is summoned to the netherworld, often due to an administrative error, and returns to

² See Robert F. Campany, *Signs from the unseen realm: Buddhist miracle tales from early medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012) and Campany, "To Hell and Back: death, near-death and other worldly journeys in early medieval China" in John J. Collins, Michael Fishbane eds., *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 343-360; Campany, "Return-from-Death Narratives in Early Medieval China" (*Journal of Chinese Religions*, Volume 18, no. 1, 1990), pp. 91-125.

the world of the living to relate his experiences. Didactic and repetitive, these stories couch their moralistic message in captivating descriptions of the netherworld as a parallel realm similar to the world of the living, marked by a bureaucracy that mirrors the earthly administration. The bureaucratic metaphor is further stressed in the seventh-century *Mingbao ji* 冥報記, which depicts King Yama's position in hell as parallel to that of the emperor in the world of the living (even if he is still subjected to requests from earthly religious practitioners).³ A similar vision is propagated by the *Huanhun ji* 還魂記, which narrates the journey of the monk Daoming 道明 in the netherworld and his encounters with King Yama and Dizang.⁴ In the twelfth century, Daoming (now written 導冥, "guide through the netherworld") was believed to act as a guide who helps orient the spirits of those who arrive in hell.

The Tang dynasty was a transformative period for the Chinese netherworld, and a watershed for narratives about journeys to hell. Of particular importance to the development of this trope in the following centuries are Tang-era *chuanqi* tales, such as "Du Zichun zhuan" 杜子春傳, and *bianwen* texts, especially "The Transformation Text on Mulian Saving His Mother from the Dark Regions" (*Da mu qian lian mingjian jiumu bianwen* 大目乾連冥間救母變文).⁵ The Mulian story-cycle not only had a profound impact on Chinese literature and drama in

³ Ganany, p. 43. On the *Mingbao ji*, see Donald Edward Gjerston, *A Study and Translation of the Ming-pao chi: A T'ang Dynasty Collection of Miracle Tales* (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1975).

⁴ This text was copied in the ninth century, but seems to be earlier. See Stephen F. Teiser: "Having Once Died and Returned to Life': Representations of Hell in Medieval China" (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Dec., 1988), 447-450. Teiser argues that this text functioned as a vehicle for the depiction of Dizang and propagates the chanting of his name and the making of his statues.

⁵ See translations in Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1994), pp. 830-35, and *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1989), and *Tun-huang Popular Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983).

general, but also provided a template for later depictions of journeys through hell, including those incorporated into origin narratives, as we shall see in section 5 below.⁶ By the Song, texts like the *Compiled Accounts of the Jade Ephemera* (*Yuli chao zhuan* 玉曆鈔傳) reveal a standardized vision of the netherworld as a confluence of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian ideas that dominated the popular perception of the netherworld.⁷ This vision of the netherworld set the stage, quite literally, for scenes of hell in Yuan dramas, such as *Lü Dongbin Delivers Tieguai Li* (*Lü Dongbin du Tieguai Li Yue* 呂洞賓度鐵拐李岳) by Yue Bochuan 岳伯川.⁸

In late-Ming fiction and drama, hell is often used as a setting for a specific scene, assuming a generally accepted view of the netherworld among its reader-viewers, without delving into its structure or depicting its landscape. Characters in late-Ming fiction and drama descend to the netherworld for various reasons: to consult the registers of life and death or use them to change the fate of certain individuals, to save their loved-ones from the torments of hell, to bring grievances before the impartial courts of hell, or to take up bureaucratic positions in hell. In scene 23 from *Peony Pavilion*, for instance, the presiding judge examines the entry of Du Liniang in the registers of marriage and consequently sends her back to the world of the living to

⁶ Regarding the Mulian story-cycle, see Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: the Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); David Johnson ed., *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: "Mu-lien rescues his mother" in Chinese popular culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Qitao Guo, *Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage: the Confucian transformation of popular culture in late Imperial Huizhou* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁷ Yuli texts were produced continuously since the Song until modern times, both in manuscript and printed forms. They had multiple functions that might be termed ritualistic in nature; laypeople and religious practitioners alike consulted them as a calendar, almanac, and spiritual guide. In late-imperial China, some Yuli texts were accompanied by vivid illustrations of hell, as we shall see in section 6.

⁸ See Sawada Mizuho 澤田瑞穂, *Jigokuhen: Chugoku no meikaisetsu* 地獄変: 中国の冥界説 (Tokyo: Hirakawa Shuppansha, 1991), pp. 154-155. An alternative title of this play reads *Yue kong mu jie Tieguai Li huanhun* 岳孔目借鐵拐李還魂. This Yuan play, starring Lü Dongbin and Tieguai Li of the Eight Immortals, might have inspired chapters 4-7 of *Dongyouji*.

fulfill her destined marriage with Liu Mengmei.⁹ Invariably, these descents to hell are related to two prominent roles that the netherworld plays in the popular cosmography: as a vault of information on the fate of humankind, and as the only just and unbiased judiciary system in the universe. But while descents to the netherworld are a common trope in late-Ming narratives and dramas, expository journeys through hell are rarer by far. This feature sets origin narratives apart from contemporaneous commercially-produced works, raising questions about their nature, purpose, and reading experiences.

2. Origin Narratives and Hell in Late-Ming Writing

In a genre that extols the lives of cultural icons, it might seem strange to find such a profound preoccupation with death and the afterlife of ordinary people, considering that none of the protagonists share this fate when their own time on earth reaches its end. Yet time and again origin narratives take us down to the netherworld and bring death to life, sometimes literally. Our protagonists travel through hell for a variety of reasons and their experiences there diverge markedly. Some are commissioned by divine authorities to fulfill a bureaucratic task in hell, like Zhong Kui (see section 3). Others decide to descend to the realm of the dead on their own volition, whether for the benefit of all mankind (Guanyin) or to save their own loved-ones (Han Xiangzi), sometimes in direct defiance of heaven (Huaguang, see section 5). Some journeys through the netherworld allow the protagonists to redeem themselves by offering salvation to the suffering souls in hell (Sa Shoujian, see section 4). Hell journeys in origin narratives are not uniform, ranging from the saintly and eschatological to the selfish and disruptive. However, they

⁹ Unlike most depictions of the netherworld, this scene is neither didactic nor grave; its portrayal of the court and its judge is highly comical and rife with erotic puns; see Cyril Birch's translation of this scene in Tang Xianzu, *The Peony Pavilion* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 1999), pp. 120-135.

share several key characteristics, both in their content and in their narrative functions. These journeys play an important role in the trajectory of the narrative while further highlighting the effectiveness of hagiographic narratives as devotional aids and vehicles for knowledge about the otherworldly.

Primarily, journeys through hell in origin narratives appear toward the end of the narrative, marking the final stage in the protagonist's path toward attainment and ascension. This chthonic tour qualifies the protagonist as a perfected being and proves his or her worthiness of ascension. The traits that the protagonists must exemplify and the skills they should hone in order to ascend vary according to the type of protagonist; while Guanyin and Sa Shoujian are required to show compassion and the ability to offer salvation to humankind, Zhong Kui must exhibit his skills as a bureaucrat and exorcist. The journey through the netherworld, in other words, serves as the final test that prepares the protagonist to assume his or her predestined role as an immortal or deity.

Structurally, the journey through the netherworld in origin narratives mirrors the general framework of the protagonist's life as a circular trajectory of descent to the human world and re-ascend to heaven, as discussed in Chapter 1. This internal mirroring further accentuates the circularity that characterizes origin narratives, underscoring the inevitability of their predestined fate as extraordinary individuals – as deities and immortals in the making. The basic outline of the duplicated circularity of the plot follows this general scheme:

Heaven → Human World → Netherworld → Human World → Heaven

Origin narratives reflect a prevalent vision of the netherworld in late-imperial China that draws equally from Buddhist, Daoist, and popular traditions, coupling the Buddhist Ten Kings with the myriad Daoist hells or “earth prisons,” all framed within a bureaucratic structure subjugated to the divine court of the Jade Emperor. The narratives use several terms interchangeably in referring to the netherworld, including “earth prison” (*diyu* 地獄), the realm of yin (*yinsi* 陰司 and *yinzhai* 陰宅), the “dark world” (*mingjian* 冥間 and *mingfu* 冥府), and Fengdu 豐都. While the first three are general terms for the world of the dead, the last term – Fengdu – was used to designate a specific type of Daoist netherworld since the first centuries AD.¹⁰ In late Ming, although Fengdu was still associated to some degree with its earlier characteristics, most notably with Mount Tai 泰山, it was often used in a more general sense, pertaining to the realm of the dead as a whole.

The netherworld depicted in origin narratives is dark and punitive, but it is not evil. Although for the majority of mankind – guilty of various sins – the experience of traversing hell is painful, for some individuals this realm represents a rare chance to correct injustices suffered in life, whether by returning to life or by receiving compensations in their next incarnation.¹¹ Similarly, the rulers and functionaries of hell, from the Ten Kings to the last of the “demon-clerks,” are not malevolent, but are rather depicted as neutral and even benign bureaucrats

¹⁰ See Christine Mollier, “La Méthode de l'Empereur du Nord du Mont Fengdu: Une tradition exorciste du Taoïsme Médiéval” (*T'oung Pao*, Second Series, Vol. 83, Fasc. 4/5, 1997), pp. 329-385.

¹¹ See section 4; Sa Shoujian brings back to life Wang E's victims as compensation for their unjust deaths. This characteristic of the netherworld in late-Ming popular imagination is also prominent in stories about Judge Baogong serving as Yama in hell; see Noga Ganany, “Baogong as King Yama in the Literature and Religious Worship of Late-Ming China” (*Asia Major*, Third Series, vol. 28, no. 2, Fall 2015), pp. 39-75.

fulfilling crucial administrative positions.¹² Furthermore, officials who are summoned from the world of the living to take up positions in hell – a recurring trope in Chinese storytelling – do not regard it as punishment or humiliation. Quite the contrary: it is usually taken as a sign of their honesty and incorruptibility as civil servants.

In origin narratives, protagonists are usually welcomed cordially by the authorities of hell, i.e., the Ten Kings and their courts, as well as by the lower-level functionaries, and do not suffer any ill treatment (the only exception is Huaguang, as we shall see in section 5). Moreover, the administrators of hell show the utmost respect and subservience to the protagonists, in accordance with their status as destined immortals or deities. A telling and quite comical example of this relationship appears in chapter 16 of the *Origin Story of Han Xiangzi*: the spirit of Han Xiangzi descends to hell to check the registers of life and death and see what the future has in store for his uncle, Han Yu, whom he has been trying to convert (Xiangzi's body remains in the world of the living, seemingly unconscious in a drunken stupor). Because his visit to the netherworld was not prearranged, his arrival throws the netherworld bureaucracy into great confusion and disorder. Groups of hell officers quickly crowd around him, as the Ten Kings rush out excitedly to greet him, their clothes in disarray. Their subsmissiveness is even more apparent when they assist Han Xiangzi in checking the registers. Seeing Xiangzi erasing his uncle's and his father-in-law's entries from the registers of life and death in order to prevent them from reincarnating, King Yama protests somewhat meekly, and quickly accepts Xiangzi's explanation (that they are destined to become immortals). Once he is done, a grand procession accompanies Han Xiangzi on his way out of the netherworld. In all his interactions in hell, he is invariably

¹² This benign and neutral character of the functionaries of the Chinese hell stand in stark contrast to the European Christian hell, ruled and populated by the adversaries of Heaven. See Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace & co., 1993), pp. 83-133.

regarded as representing a higher authority, and therefore his mere presence there puts everyone on edge.¹³

The trope of journeys through hell in origin narratives reveals the strong connections of this genre to other media celebrating cultural icons during this period, particularly *baojuan* and the performance arts. Take the Miaoshan/Guanyin myth-cycle, for instance. The *Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷 includes a long passage about Miaoshan's journey through hell between her execution and her retreat to Xiangshan.¹⁴ This *baojuan* seems to have been the basis for chapter 14 of the origin narrative celebrating Guanyin, *The Origin and Cultivation Narrative of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of the Southern Sea (Nanhai Guanshiyin pusa chushen xiuxing zhuan* 南海觀世音菩薩出身修行傳).¹⁵ Despite its adaptation into the *xiaoshuo* narration style and the format of origin narrative, the story maintains many of its features and functions as a *baojuan*, including the *shanshu*-type listing of sins and punishments, and the eschatological deliverance of all the souls in hell. As the story goes, after Miaoshan is executed by her own father, her soul descends to the netherworld, where she is greeted by a messenger from the Kings, who heard of

¹³ The *Origin Story of Han Xiangzi* (Han Xiangzi quanzhuan 韓湘子全傳) was authored and published by Yang Erzeng 楊爾曾 at the Jiuru tang 九如堂 in Nanjing in 1623. For more details about this work and its publishing history, see Chapter 1. See translation of this scene in Yang Erzeng, *The Story of Han Xiangzi*, translated and annotated by Philip Clart (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), pp. 218-225.

¹⁴ This text emerged during the Ming (along with a number of other *baojuan* on Guanyin), not coincidentally around the same time that the ritual for feeding hungry ghosts (*Yulanpen*) reached its greatest popularity. See Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: the Chinese transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 320-333. Interestingly, the man who serves as Miaoshan's guide in hell is the Daoist Huanglong zhenren 黃龍真人, a recurring character in late-Ming narratives, including Deng Zhimo's saints trilogy.

¹⁵ Yu, *Kuan-yin*, pp. 438-448. Yu argues that this origin narrative was instrumental in popularizing Mount Putuo and a manifestation of Guanyin as the "Guanyin of the Southern Sea." This narrative explicitly identifies Xiangshan (Mount Xiang) with Mount Putuo. During the Wanli era in late Ming, Mount Putuo became a major pilgrimage site under the patronage of Emperor Wanli and his mother, the Empress Dowager Li. This period also saw a surge in narratives about Guanyin in various media, including *baojuan* and narrative texts. See also discussion in Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan*, pp. 57-79, 98-101, 105-107, 110-117.

her deeds of virtue and compassion in the world of the living. The Kings invite Miaoshan to tour (*you* 游) the eighteen hells (*diyu* 地獄). Passing through the gates of hell, Miaoshan gazes at the multitude of wretched souls suffering various kinds of punishments (*xing* 刑). Her guide explains which tortures correspond to various types of transgressions. Miaoshan encounters the suffering souls of the nuns that resided in the temple her father had ordered to be burned (in an attempt to kill her). She instructs them to follow her in chanting sutras, and soon King Dizang 地藏王 appears to inform her that he had appealed to King Yama on their behalf and managed to release the nuns from hell to be reincarnated into the world of the living.

It is not only her actions that impact the world of the dead, but Miaoshan's very presence in the netherworld transforms its landscape and inhabitants. For instance, as she approaches, the Lake of Blood transforms into a lotus pond. The greatest transformation of the netherworld comes when Miaoshan chants sutras in order to deliver all the souls in hell: flowers rain on the netherworld, which is now brightly illuminated. The tormented are released from their shackles, their suffering ended, and as they are all reincarnated, the hells suddenly empty. The Ten Kings, the clerks of hell, and the prisoners all listen intently to Miaoshan as she recites the scriptures. Once she is done, hell turns into heaven and the instruments of torture transform into lotuses (地獄化作天堂, 刑具化作蓮花). However, not everyone is pleased with this transformation; the officials of the netherworld warn the Kings that turning hell into heaven deprives the cosmos of a place to process and punish the wicked. Taking note, the Kings order attendants to escort Miaoshan back to the world of the living.



Figure 23: pages from Guanyin's journey through hell in *The Origin and Cultivation Narrative of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of the Southern Sea*.

Significantly, journeys through hell place origin narratives in a special position within the larger landscape of late-Ming literature. While descents to hell are a very popular recurring motif in both narrative texts and dramas during the late Ming, detailed descriptions of hell, particularly those that depict the realm of the dead in its entirety, are far rarer. The comprehensive portrayals of the netherworld in origin narratives, such as those of Zhong Kui and Sa Shoujian discussed below, are nearly unmatched in late-imperial China.

3. The Demon-Queler Zhong Kui Inspects Hell

Pen in hand and a tablet under his arm, Zhong Kui descends to the netherworld neither as a savior on an eschatological mission nor as a filial son seeking to deliver his relatives, but rather as an inspector in the service of the divine administration. The virtuous erudite, whose grotesque features denied him an official career in the world of the living, is tasked with inspecting the registers of the Ten Courts of Hell and surveying the distribution of karmic retribution to the

souls of the dead. Evidently an able administrator, Zhong Kui's scrupulousness is only matched by the meticulous description of the hells he visits.

The *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* devotes over a third of its narrative to Zhong Kui's journey through hell (taking up chapters 17 to 28, a total of twelve chapters out of thirty-four). This tour forms the heart of the narrative, both in its central position and in its narrative function as a turning-point in Zhong Kui's life story, a *rite de passage* that qualifies him to assume his destined role as a subjugator of demons. During his journey through hell, Zhong Kui's skills as a bureaucrat are put to the test no less than the functioning of the underworld courts he inspects.

While a descent to hell might seem a natural course of action for a demon-queller, this motif is actually a relatively late addition to his myth-cycle, only appearing during the Ming, in tandem with a growing interest in the netherworld in late-Ming popular culture. This motif quickly gained traction and was further expanded in Zhong Kui narratives in the following centuries. Qing-dynasty works celebrating Zhong Kui elaborated on his journey through hell with a healthy dose of humor and sarcasm.¹⁶

The *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* was published sometime during the Wanli period by the publisher Liu Shuangsong 劉雙松 at the Anzheng tang 安正堂 printing house in Jianyang (its full title reads *The Newly-Carved Illustrated Chronology of the Complete Narrative of Zhong Kui of the Tang, ding qie quanxiang anjian Tang Zhong Kui quanzhuan* 鼎鍬全像按鑑唐鍾馗全傳). Similarly to its fellow origin narratives of the Wanli period, it is accompanied by *shangtu-xiawen* illustrations and divided into 4 *juan*. Its language is likewise characterized by a mixture

¹⁶ Yin Wei 殷伟, *Zhong Kui* 钟馗 (Beijing: wenwu chubanshe, 2009), pp. 198-204. See also Hu Wanchuan 胡萬川, *Zhong Kui shenhua yu xiaoshuo de yanjiu* 鍾馗神話與小說之研究 (Taipei: wenshizhe xue jicheng, 1980), pp. 127-150.

of the “vernacular” and simple classical structures. Each chapter concludes with a heptasyllabic poem in four lines that summarizes the moral of the chapter. Certain pages seem to be missing from the surviving copy, which ends in the middle of chapter 34. In recent years, another version of this work came to light; titled *The Completely-Illustrated Origin Story of the Demon-Queller Zhong Kui of the Tang* (*quan xiang Tang Zhong Kui chushen qu yao zhuan* 全像唐鍾馗出身祛妖傳), it seems to be almost identical to the abovementioned work, and may have been printed by using the same set of woodblocks.¹⁷ Like the abovementioned edition, it was published by Liu Shuangsong and its four *juan* are accompanied throughout the book by “picture-above-text” illustrations. The existence of this volume suggests that there was more than one publishing cycle of the Zhong Kui origin narrative during the Wanli period, thus attesting to its commercial success.

While Zhong Kui was a household name by the late Ming, the *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* seems to have been the first hagiography of the demon-queller in any medium, and the first narrative devoted solely to Zhong Kui. Premodern Chinese writers as well as modern scholars trace the legend of Zhong Kui to the Tang dynasty, and by the time the first anecdotes about him appeared in Song-dynasty *biji* collections his reverence was already widespread.¹⁸ While nearly all textual references to Zhong Kui are found in non-canonical texts, Li Fengmao points to a

¹⁷ This volume recently came to light in Japan, and was donated to the city of Jianyang, Fujian, some four-hundred years after it was published there by Liu Shuangsong. The cover page and title are different from the previously known version of Zhong Kui’s origin story. It is also a bit longer – 160 pages, in comparison to the 154 pages of the incomplete known version. I have not had the chance to see this edition yet. For more details, see Shen Hong 沈泓, *Zhong Kui wenhua* 钟馗文化 (Beijing: Zhongguo wuzi chubanshe, 2012), pp. 132-134.

¹⁸ Regarding the origins of the Zhong Kui myth, see Danielle Éliasberg, *Le Roman du Pourfendeur de Démons: traduction annotée et commentaires* (Paris: Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1976), pp. 7-13; Shen Hong, *Zhong Kui wenhua*, pp. 1-46; Yin Wei, *Zhong Kui*, pp. 48-60; Zheng Zuren 郑尊仁, *Zhong Kui yanjiu* 鍾馗研究 (Taipei: Xiu wei zi xun ke ji gu fen youxian gongsi, 2004), pp. 31-52.

Tang scripture included in the Daoist canon as an early testament to the popular use of Zhong Kui as a charm against evil spirits before the Song.¹⁹ As a demon-queller, Zhong Kui was revered particularly during the New Year celebrations by hanging his portraits and performing exorcistic dances. Zhong Kui is also revered on the fifth day of the fifth month (*duanwu* 端五), a celebration rife with exorcistic rituals to ward off pestilence. Some sources record that he was honored on the fifteenth of every month, while others note that his portraits were hung in houses and on doors throughout the year.²⁰ Zhong Kui's image was also used in late-imperial China by doctors to cure illnesses that were believed to have been caused by demonic infestation.

The Zhong Kui lore is characterized by a strong visual emphasis. In fact, references to visual representations of Zhong Kui go back to the ninth century, predating the earliest textual references to his myth that appeared during the Southern Song. The Song literatus and politician Ouyang Xiu records a new-year custom in the Tang dynasty wherein the emperor would give his ministers an almanac with the portrait of Zhong Kui; whether or not this custom was indeed practiced in the Tang court, there is evidence that it was enthusiastically adopted by elite families and was later practiced by all social strata across China.²¹ Alongside the popular reverence of Zhong Kui as an exorcist and safeguard against evil spirits, he was also a favorite subject for artists in late-imperial China (see figure 24), perhaps due to his unusual iconography. Zhong Kui is usually depicted as a somewhat grotesque, fierce-looking official with dark complexion,

¹⁹ The text he analyzes is *Taishang dongyuan shenzhou jing* 太上洞淵神咒經 (DZ 335). See Li Fengmao 李豐楙, “Zhong Kui yu nuo li jiqi xiju” 鍾馗與儺禮及其戲劇 (*Minsu quyi*, vol. 39, 1986), pp. 69-99. Zhong Kui is only mentioned in this text briefly as someone who effectively eliminates and deters evil spirits and ghosts (*shagui* 杀鬼, *bixie* 辟邪). Although Li dates this text to the Tang, its inclusion in the fifteenth-century Daoist canon leaves much room to wonder when precisely it was compiled and edited.

²⁰ Éliasberg, *Le Roman du Pourfendeur de Démons*, pp. 27-33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-28.

holding a sword or a tablet, and often accompanied by a group of demons.²² This visual emphasis also underlies the *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui*, and is particularly stressed in the chapters depicting his journey through hell, as we shall see below.



Figure 24: Dai Jin 戴進, “Zhong Kui Travels Far” 鍾馗遠遊 (Ming dynasty, from *Zhong Kui baitu*, p. 14).

Sometime after the Song dynasty, Zhong Kui is mentioned in connection to the role of a righteous judge, comparable to that held by the famous Judge Bao, or Baogong.²³ Moreover, in Ming-era dramas and narrative texts, Zhong Kui is sometimes seen collaborating with Baogong,

²² See Wang Lanxi 王闌西 and Wang Shucun 王樹村, *Zhong Kui baitu* 鍾馗百图 (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1997); Shen Hong, *Zhong Kui wenhua*; and Yin Wei, *Zhong Kui*, pp. 91-148.

²³ Yin Wei, *Zhong Kui*, pp. 60-69.

and at other times as competing with him and even criticizing the celebrated judge.²⁴ In Wanli-era courtroom anthologies, such as the *Longtu gongan* 龍圖公案 and *Baijia gongan* 百家公案, Baogong serves in two parallel positions: as a judge in the human world by day, and as King Yama of the fifth court of hell by night.²⁵ According to his rich lore, Baogong's incorruptibility and unwavering sense of justice rendered him the perfect official to assume the role of Yama, carrying out the judgment of the dead and compensating those who had suffered injustices. In this role, Baogong serves as both a punitive and benevolent force, showcasing the two main ideas underlying the late-imperial conceptualization of the realm of the dead: the notion of karmic retribution and the bureaucratic metaphor. The conflation of the Zhong Kui myth with the Baogong lore stems from the association of both figures with the courts of the netherworld during the Wanli period.

As mentioned earlier, the *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* is the first work to describe Zhong Kui's journey through the netherworld. This theme later became a mainstay of later narrative texts about Zhong Kui, such as the Qing-era *Zhong Kui zhao gui zhuan* 鍾馗捉鬼傳 (1696) and *Tang Zhong Kui ping gui zhuan* 唐鍾馗平鬼傳 (1785).²⁶ Nevertheless, the focus and tone in depictions of Zhong Kui's netherworld journey in later narratives was markedly different from that of the Wanli work; the meticulous and didactic descriptions of the late Ming gave way

²⁴ See for instance the Ming *zaju* drama *Qingfengnian wugui nao Zhong Kui* 慶豐年五鬼鬧鍾馗 and chapters 32-33 in *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui*.

²⁵ See Noga Ganany, "Baogong as King Yama in the Literature and Religious Worship of Late-Ming China" (*Asia Major*, Third Series, vol. 28, no. 2, Fall 2015), pp. 39-75.

²⁶ Although the perseverance of this theme in later works might reflect a general association of Zhong Kui with the netherworld in popular culture, the fact that Qing-era narratives were heavily inspired by the Wanli work suggests that the *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* played an important role in cementing Zhong Kui's descent to hell in his lore.

to humoristic, even sarcastic portrayals of his chthonic tour. What changed? This shift should be understood in light of a larger transition in the depiction of Zhong Kui in popular culture and in the changing reading habits of narrative texts during the Qing. The structure, content, and tone of the *Origin Narrative* suggest that it was conceived as informative and instructive rather than entertaining; his tour of hell is a didactic tool that combines his hagiography with moralizing preaching. By contrast, later works sought to create a more psychologically-complex and entertaining portrayal of Zhong Kui and his adventures, including his netherworld tour.

Zhong Kui of the *Origin Narrative* is as virtuous as he is efficient in exterminating demons. Even before his attempt to pass the imperial examinations, he was already summoned once to the court of the Jade Emperor and entrusted with exorcistic missions in the world of the living. When his parents and wife hear from an acquaintance that Zhong Kui committed suicide at the imperial court after he was denied entrance, their grief quickly converts into fatal illness and they soon find themselves invited for an audience with the Jade Emperor (since their benevolence in life earned them a swift transition to heaven). It is during their audience with the Jade Emperor that he informs them – and us – that he sent Zhong Kui to the netherworld to inspect good and evil (我差他往冥司稽查善惡). The narrative then immediately shifts to Zhong Kui's experiences in the realm of the dead, taking up his point of view.

With what vision of hell did the *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* enthrall its readers in late Ming? We follow Zhong Kui as he journeys through the land of the dead, seeing it through his eyes. The narrative describes in great detail the natural landscape of the netherworld, its rivers and mountains, as well as its man-made (or rather ghost-made) structures: its gates, roads, and halls. This cinematic description places great emphasis on the visual experiences of Zhong Kui, as if guiding us through a painted scroll. In the course of Zhong Kui's chthonic travels we also

encounter the various functionaries of hell and learn about the bureaucratic structure of the realm of the dead. His inspection of the Ten Courts is extremely repetitive, following the same basic structure: first, Zhong Kui receives an audience with the ruler (king) of that particular court (殿) and inspects its registers (善惡文冊). In each court he is warmly welcomed and enjoys the full cooperation of the ruling king and his officials. Zhong Kui is then led to the hell (地獄) of that court, that is, the main arena of punishment, where he witnesses the various tortures suffered by the sinful dead. Then follows a particularly graphic depiction of the instruments of torture and the suffering of the condemned. It is there that the ghosts that serve as his guide inform Zhong Kui what sins the wretched sufferers committed in life to earn them these torments. Zhong Kui interviews several of these poor souls, who recount the evil deeds they committed in life. In some instances, a wronged person complains to Zhong Kui that he or she do not belong in hell; he investigates and if there was indeed some error (a clerical mix-up of names is the most common case), he arranges for the wronged person to return to the world of the living or ascend to heaven.



Figure 25: Pages from Zhong Kui's journey through hell in *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui*

The Ten Courts that Zhong Kui inspects largely corresponds to other popular depictions of the netherworld prevalent during the Ming, drawing from both Buddhist and Daoist lore.²⁷ The arrangement of the ten courts and the names of their kings correspond exactly to the widely-influential Tang-dynasty *Scripture of the Ten Kings*.²⁸ However, the names of the specific hells

²⁷ See Zhou Zhuojie 周濯街, *Yanwang ye 閻王爺* (Taipei: Guojia chubanshe, 2001); Shen Hong 沈泓, *Shidian yanluo: minjian shuiluhua zhong de wuqing lunhui* 十殿閻羅: 民間水陸畫中的無情輪回 (Beijing: Zhongguo caifu chubanshe, 2013).

²⁸ See Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), pp. 173-178, 223.

(地獄) that are attached to each court and the specific tortures practiced in them draw more from Daoist imagery of the netherworld than from Buddhist sources.²⁹ These courts are:

The 1 st Court	King Qin Guang 秦廣大王	“Hell of Mountain of Knives” 刀山地獄
The 2 nd Court	King Chujiang 初江大王 (“king of the first river”)	“Freezing Hell” 寒水地獄
The 3 rd Court	King Song di 宋帝大王	“Saw Hell” 鋸解地獄 (also includes the “viewing home balcony” 望乡台)
The 4 th Court	King Wu Guan 伍官大王 (“king of five offices”)	“Grinding Hell” 磨磨地獄
The 5 th Court	King Yama 閻羅大王	“Boiling Oil Hell” 沸油地獄
The 6 th Court	King Biancheng 變成大王 (“king of transformation”)	“Mill Hell” 磑搗地獄
The 7 th Court	King of Taishan 泰山大王	“Cutting Tongue Hell” 割舌地獄
The 8 th Court	King Pingdeng 平等大王 (“king of equality/uniformity”)	“Steelyard Scale Hell” 稱秤地獄
The 9 th Court	King Dushi 都市大王 (“king of the capital”)	“Wooden Donkey Hell” 木驢地獄
The 10 th Court	King Zhuanlun 轉輪大王 (“king of the wheel of reincarnation”)	“Hall of Reincarnation” 轉輪十殿

Zhong Kui’s journey through the netherworld highlights the ambivalent nature of ghosts or spirits, *gui* 鬼, both in his myth-cycle and in the popular conceptualization of the realm of the dead. Ghosts roaming the world of the living are often considered dangerous, unpredictable, and potentially polluting. In the Zhong Kui lore, ghosts play a dual role as Zhong Kui’s assistants and as his victims. In the netherworld, ghosts fulfill numerous functions, most of them benign. As Zhong Kui’s inspection tour reveals, most of the lower administrative positions in hell are filled

²⁹ For instance, these hells correspond, though in different order, to the hells depicted in the Daoist temple Shiba diyu miao 十八地獄廟 in Beijing, as recorded by Goodrich; see Anne Swann Goodrich, *Chinese Hells: the Peking Temple of Eighteen Hells and Chinese Conceptions of Hell* (St. Augustine: Monumenta Serica, 1981), pp. 43-56.

by ghosts, who serve as clerks, attendants, guards, etcetera. Yet hell is not all procedure and paperwork. Ghosts become the stuff of nightmares when fulfilling hell's more gruesome tasks – carrying out the punishments and inflicting the tortures prescribed by the Kings. While visual depictions of the different hells often portray these ghosts as demonic beings who seem to be taking cruel pleasure in tormenting the dead, in the narrative they are presented either as a neutral force, mere instruments of the courts, or as sympathizing to some degree with those who suffer under their hand.

The *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui* seems to have exerted considerable influence on the popular perception of hell and inspired other works in late Ming and early Qing dealing with the netherworld. In his study of the *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing his Mother in Three Rebirths*, Berezkin argues that the persona and storyline of Huang Chao was modeled after that of Zhong Kui, and specifically draws upon this Wanli-era origin narrative in its depiction of Zhong Kui's role as demon-queller and inspector of hell.³⁰ This narrative also set the tone for the development of the Zhong Kui myth in the following centuries; in particular, his journey through hell became a fixture of Qing novels and a recurring visual element in the Zhong Kui lore.

³⁰ Rostislav Berezkin, "The Transformation of Historical Material in Religious Storytelling: the story of Huang Chao (d. 884) in the *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing his Mother in Three Rebirths*" (*Late Imperial China*, vol. 34, no. 2, December 2013), pp. 100-103. According to this *baojuan*, Mulian inadvertently freed souls of the dead before they had completed their cycle of punishment in hell, and therefore he was ordered by King Yama and the bodhisattva Dizang to be reborn three times, so that in each incarnation he would ferry those souls back to the netherworld; only after his task is complete will he be allowed to rescue his mother from hell. See translation of this *baojuan* in Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: the Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

4. The Sainly Sa Shoujian Redeems Souls in Fengdu

Of all late-Ming origin narratives, the cries of the suffering souls in hell sound the loudest in Deng Zhimo's *The Enchanterd Date* (*Zhouzaoji* 咒棗記), which tells the origin story of the Daoist immortal Sa Shoujian 薩守堅.³¹ In this narrative text, the netherworld (referred to as Fengdu 豐都 and *mingsi* 冥司) provides a stage for Sa to demonstrate his effectiveness as a miracle-working savior of the common people. The netherworld to which Sa Shoujian journeys is darker and more sinister than the one Zhong Kui inspects. Contrary to the administrative emphasis of the *Origin Story of Zhong Kui*, in *The Enchanted Date* our gaze is directed towards the souls of the dead and the various hells they populate, while glancing over the bureaucratic nature of the courts of hell and their administration. In its landscape and organization, this hell is quite similar to the one depicted in the abovementioned origin story of Guanyin, *The Origin and Cultivation Narrative of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of the Southern Sea*.³² This ominous portrayal of the netherworld and its inhabitants stands in stark contrast to the saintly image of Sa Shoujian, further highlighting his righteousness and holiness.

Of the three icons that Deng Zhimo celebrates in his saints trilogy, Sa Shoujian is the least known to modern readers. Not much is known about the Song-dynasty Daoist Sa Shoujian (circa 1141-1178?). According to his brief hagiography in Zhao Daoyi's 趙道一 *Lishi zhenxian*

³¹ This un-illustrated narrative text was published in 1603 by the Cuiqing tang publishing house of the Yu family. Its full title reads *Carved Tale of the Five-Era Perfected Sa Attaining the Dao and the Enchanted Date* (*qie wudai Sa zhenren dedao zhouzao ji* 鐫五代薩真人得道咒棗記).

³² The description of Sa's netherworld generally follows that of other origin narratives, with some variation. The first monument he encounters is the "ghosts gate" (鬼門關) of Fengdu. Yama's palace is described as a lofty tower with balustrades of white jade, engulfed in flames and guarded by fierce-looking "ox-head" and "horse-head" attendants. The order and names of the Ten Kings is slightly different from those we encountered in Zhong Kui's origin narrative above; they are: Qinguang 秦廣王、Chujiang 楚江王、Song di 宋帝王、Wu guan 伍官王、Yanluo (Yama) 閻羅王、Taishan 泰山王、Pingdeng 平等主、Dushi 都市王、Biancheng 卞城王、and Zhuanlun 轉輪王.

tidao tongjia 歷世真仙體道通鑒, Sa Shoujian was a native of either Shandong or Shanxi who served as a physician in Sichuan, and chose a life of Daoist reclusion after one of his patients died of a medication he prescribed.³³ Sa came to be associated with Thunder Rites and was revered by the sect Xihe pai 西河派 (a branch of the Shenxiao school of ritual practice). His cult flourished during the Ming, when it received imperial recognition and support.

Sa's myth-cycle is far more modest than those of Lü Dongbin and Xu Xun; he only appears in a handful of late-imperial works, including a *zaju* drama titled *Perfected Sa Snaps the Jade Peach Flower at Night* (*Sa zhenren ye duan bi taohua zaju* 薩真人夜斷碧桃花雜劇) and a brief appearance in the *Origin Story of Zhenwu* (examined in chapter 3). A short biography of Sa that draws on Zhao Daoyi's entry was also included in different late-Ming editions of *Soushen ji*, which seems to have been the main inspiration for Deng Zhimo's *The Enchanted Date*.³⁴ Deng considerably expanded the basic template this biography provided and added numerous episodes. Sa Shoujian's journey through hell is a new edition of Deng Zhimo to Sa's myth-cycle. His work remains the most elaborate and comprehensive portrayal of the Sa Shoujian legend.³⁵

Unlike Zhong Kui and Guanyin, Sa Shoujian is neither sent nor forced to descend to hell, but chooses to do so of his own volition. This journey seems to be a natural addition to a

³³ See Judith Boltz, "Sa Shoujian," in Fabrizio Pregadio ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 825-826.

³⁴ The 1593 *Soushen Daquan* included a hagiography of Sa Shoujian that draws on Zhao Daoyi's earlier hagiography; see *Xinke chuxiang zengbu soushen ji Daquan* 新刻出像增補搜神記大全 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1989), pp. 134-137, and *Sanjiao yuanliu shengdi fozu soushen daquan* 三教源流聖帝佛祖搜神大全 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1989), pp. 26-27.

³⁵ On Sa Shoujian and Deng Zhimo's *The Enchanted Date*, see Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, pp. 207-286; Xiong Wei 熊威, "Sa Shoujian xingxiang jiangou yanjiu" 薩守堅形象建構研究 (*Zongjiao xue yanjiu*, no. 2, 2016), pp. 41-49; Huang Jing 黃靜, "Zhouzao ji de neisheng mei" "咒枣记"的内省美 (*Mei yu shidai*, no. 2, 2015), pp. 84-86.

hagiography that is already profoundly marked by travel; from beginning to end, *The Enchanted Date* is a tale of constant journeying, first through the world of the living and eventually through the realm of the dead. Sa's main motivation to embark on a journey through hell is to release the souls of those he harmed in his previous incarnations as a butcher and a charlatan.³⁶ This motivation renders his journey to hell both altruistic and selfish; his main objective is helping others, but by doing so he also clears his own conscience, ridding himself from any residual moral burden that might impede his spiritual attainment. In other words, by delivering the souls of the dead, Sa Shoujian is also redeeming himself, which allows him to fulfill his predestined fate and ascend to heaven at the end of the narrative.

Hence, the position of this journey within the narrative is not coincidental. Sa's journey takes place in the final chapters (11-13) of *The Enchanted Date*, followed by his deification in chapter 14. It is a natural conclusion to a narrative that is entirely focused on proving Sa Shoujian's worthiness of his predestined role as a divine immortal. The somewhat repetitive and often tedious plot of *The Enchanted Date* follows Sa Shoujian in his worldly and otherworldly journeys as he saves people from nearly every conceivable predicament, including raising the dead.³⁷ Furthermore, his reputation as a holy person is well established by the time he reaches the netherworld, where he is honored as a saint by the Kings and their subordinates. His visit to the netherworld and the subsequent ritual he performs for the souls of the dead designate a two-stage test that enables his ascension in the last chapter.

³⁶ The text is inconsistent on this regard; in chapter 10 Sa Shoujian expresses a desire to save "wandering souls" in general (幽魂遊魄). At the beginning of chapter 11, the narrator explains that Sa must deliver the souls of those he himself harmed in previous incarnations. Yet when Sa meets the Ten Kings, he says at first that he came to hell to inquire about his deceased parents, and only later mentions his wish to help those for whom he is personally responsible.

³⁷ In chapter 4 of *The Enchanted Date*, Sa Shoujian uses talismans and chanting to revive two people. The repetitive series of benevolent deeds is customary of hagiographical writing, as I argue in Chapter 1.

Sa Shoujian's travelling companions in the netherworld are an interesting feature of this narrative. Unlike other protagonists of origin narratives who travel alone, Sa travels through hell with a companion – a malevolent deity by the name of Wang E 王惡, who, after following Sa for many years and witnessing his benevolence, wishes to change his evil ways and convert. Sa changes his name to Wang Shan 王善 and takes him along to the netherworld for educational purposes.³⁸ Wang Shan does nothing more than accompany him as a passive spectator (like ourselves), but his mere presence further highlights the didactic spirit of this netherworld journey. Moreover, the fact that the main objective of the saintly Sa and malevolent Wang is the same, to save the souls of those they had harmed, adds an ironic touch to this otherwise humdrum portrayal of hell.

Sa Shoujian and Wang Shan are guided through hell by the magistrate Cui Yu 崔玉, a recurring character in depictions of the netherworld since the Tang dynasty. In the Dunhuang *bianwen* text *Taizong in Hell*, magistrate Cui (here called Cui Ziyu 崔子玉) is portrayed as an official who holds similar concomitant positions in the bureaucracy in the world of the living and in that of the dead.³⁹ Prefect Cui became a popular deity in northern China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and appears in a number of late-imperial dramas and narratives.⁴⁰ In *The*

³⁸ According to some accounts, Wang E / Wang Shan is the Daoist deity Wang Lingguan 王靈官 (also known as “general Wang,” Wang Yuanshuai 王元帥), who was originally a malevolent city god whom Sa Shoujian converted. Like Sa Shoujian, Wang Lingguan is also associated with Thunder Rites and is primarily revered as an exorcist, best known as the guardian of Daoist temples. See Paul R. Katz, “Wang Lingguan,” in Fabrizio Pregadio ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1013-1014.

³⁹ The *Tang Taizong ru ming ji* 唐太宗入冥記, dated roughly around the ninth century, portrays the otherworldly journey taken by the Tang emperor Taizong. This motif was later adopted by a number of narratives, most notably in chapter 11 of the *Xiyouji*.

⁴⁰ See for instance the Yuan dynasty play *The Wrong Creditor* (*yuan-jia Zhai-zhu* 冤家債主) by Zheng Tingyu 鄭廷玉, which also mentions an inscription in a temple dedicated to Prefect Cui. See Valerie Hansen, *Negotiating Daily*

Enchanted Date, it is Cui Yu who describes and explains to the travelers – and ourselves – what is the purpose and nature of each of the different hells Sa and Wang visit.

The underlying feature of the netherworld that Sa Shoujian visits is that of symmetry: balancing righteousness and evil, weighing punishments and rewards vis-à-vis transgressions and good deeds. The element of balance not only characterizes hell in the mechanisms of the punishments it enacts on the sinful, but also shapes its landscape. The eye-for-an-eye law of karmic retribution is sometimes interpreted here literally; for instance, on the “sword mountain” (*daoqiang shan* 刀槍山) we find people who “injured” others during their lifetime, whereas on the “fire mountain” (*huoyan shan* 火燄山) we encounter those who were “cold,” that is, coldhearted and unkind to others. At one point, Sa and his companions reach a grand staircase, on each side of which stretches a row of eight offices: one side processes the sinful (*shang shanxing tai* 賞善行台), whereas the other - the righteous (*fa e'xing tai* 罰惡行台). The offices are completely parallel, both in their physical position and in the type of virtue or transgression they handle; for instance, the office responsible for the souls of the dutiful and loyal faces the office that processes the undutiful and treacherous; that of the filial faces the office of the unfilial, etcetera.

Repetition and duplication likewise characterize the netherworld toured by Sa Shoujian. The eighteen hells in Sa’s netherworld are depicted here as a result of the doubling of two main groups consisting of nine hells.⁴¹ Not only that, but purgatory is portrayed as the realm of repetition. Here, the sinful dead suffer the same punishment again and again in a despairing cycle

Life in Traditional China: how ordinary people used contracts, 600-1400 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 217-220.

⁴¹ These eighteen hells partially correspond to the eighteen hells in the Daoist temple Shiba diyu miao 十八地獄廟 in Beijing, as recorded by Goodrich; see Goodrich, *Chinese Hells*, pp. 43-56.

of misery. In chapter 13, we see the souls of the dead undergo all sorts of horrid, fatal tortures, only to be revived at the end of each painful death to suffer the same torment again. Repetition also reigns supreme in the narration of these hells, each described in the same fashion, following the same formula. In this respect, *The Enchanted Date* betrays its indebtedness to the didactic format of moralistic *baojuan* texts and *shanshu* tracts.

The torments of hell, however, are not eternal, but are part of a linear process from the time of death until the moment of rebirth. Sa Shoujian's journey through hell provides specific information concerning the trajectory of the souls of the dead after they leave the realm of the living. As they arrive at the famous "Viewing Home Terrace" (*wang xiang tai* 望鄉台) in chapter 11, his guide explains: "When ordinary people die, on the first day they arrive at the temple of the City God, where they are sorted into categories. On the second day, they are transported to the temple of the Eastern Peak, where they meet with the Emperor of Heavenly Benevolence, who assigns them numbers. It is only on the third day that they arrive in Fengdu. When they arrive here, in their hearts they are not yet dead [i.e. do not embrace death yet]. King Yama orders them to climb this terrace and gaze at their former home and family. They cry and lament, and only then do they accept death and forsake earth. Therefore, it is called 'Viewing Home Terrace.'" "

After the souls go through the different courts of the netherworld and receive their punishments or rewards according to their deeds, they are processed in the office of reincarnation, where their next destination is determined. Some cases, however, are more complicated than others, and not all souls fall neatly into one of the "six paths" of rebirth.⁴²

⁴² There is some variation in the depiction of the "six paths" in late-imperial Chinese texts. In *Yuli* 玉曆 texts, the six paths are often divided into human elite, human commoners, mammals, fowl, fish, and insects. See Donnelly, pp. 62-63, 128-129.

Moreover, those who are not fortunate enough to have their families conduct the right ritual on their behalf suffer more hardship in the netherworld and might even be stranded in hell. In this respect, “hungry ghosts” – those who died without leaving offspring – posit a particularly serious problem for both the realm of the living and the dead. Here *The Enchanted Date* provides a dual solution: revering saviors like Sa Shoujian, Guanyin, and Dizang on the one hand, and conducting a rite for delivering souls on the other hand.

As Sa Shoujian and Wang Shan prepare to leave the netherworld, the souls of the dead request in earnest that once they return to the world of the living they perform a sacrifice ritual for the deliverance of souls (“真人，你既在幽府走了一遭，回到陽世可修個大大的齋供普度我等幽魂”). Sa remains true to his word and conducts a ritual on their behalf in chapter 14, the last chapter of the narrative. Upon his return home, Sa Shoujian sells some of his writings and with the money he earns he organizes a ten-day ritual that includes inviting yellow-turban Daoists to burn three kinds of incense (清淨香、自然香、無為香), sacrificing three types of foods (法喜食、甘露食、人天食), chanting three scriptures (度人經，消災經，救苦經), and offering three kinds of prayers (慈悲懺、幽冥懺、拔亡懺). He moreover erects a banner calling forth the “lonely souls” (or “hungry ghosts”) of the world of the dead. The poor souls of men and women, old and young, come to feast three times a day. In order to keep malevolent spirits and demons from the offerings for the dead, the Jade Emperor sends down the Horse-Spirit Official (Maling guan 馬靈官) to chase them away with “samadhi fire” (三昧火燒). However, the fire also burns the food offerings, so that even the souls cannot feast upon them. What to do? Eventually, it is the bodhisattva Guanyin who comes to the rescue: disguised as a Demon King, she mingles with the malicious spirits, and upon reaching the sacrificial table, she sprays sweet dew that puts down the fire. Sa Shoujian finally concludes the ten-day ceremony by

burning “hell money” (冥錢), “documents” (公文), and talismans (符), all addressed to the officials of the netherworld. With this ritual, Sa proves that he is able to save both the living and the dead (“阳间救济群生，阴府超度众鬼”), a crucial condition for the completion of his origin story.⁴³

The description of the ritual Sa performs in this narrative corresponds to religious practices popular in the Jiangnan region in late Ming.⁴⁴ In a historical perspective, *The Enchanted Date* corroborates existing evidence and opens another window onto ritual practices surrounding death and the afterlife in late Ming. Furthermore, in terms of reading experience and the function of this narrative as a cultural commodity, this chapter highlights the usefulness of this text as a layman’s guide to religious practice. It complements the similarly detailed descriptions of the exorcistic and healing rituals that Sa Shoujian performs in chapters 4, 6, 7, and 10. Throughout the narrative, Sa not only performs rituals himself, but the text even shows him teaching certain techniques to others. In chapter 6, for instance, Sa teaches a family of ordinary people how to perform Thunder Rites. The detailed description of the rite for the souls of the dead in chapter 14 provides a practical template for the reader to organize similar rituals, down to the specific sacrifices and scriptures used.

Sa Shoujian’s journey through hell in *The Enchanted Date* is a new addition to his myth-cycle. This addition seems to be motivated by the surge of interest in the netherworld in late Ming in general and the popularity of the trope of journeys through hell in Wanli-era narrative texts in particular.⁴⁵ Its didactic depiction of the netherworld and its meticulous portrayal of the

⁴³ Li Fengmao, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, p. 243.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-241.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

rite for the souls of the dead betray the text's multifunctionality, conflating several types of reading practices. Here, the entertaining hagiography of *The Enchanted Date* integrates useful information on death and the afterlife, as well as the rituals for overcoming the dangers they pose to the living and the dead.

5. The Mischievous Huaguang Disrupts Hell

“As the story goes, Huaguang was overjoyed that he managed to save his mother from hell [Fengdu] in his third attempt. His mother, the Mother Goddess Jizhituo (吉芝陀圣母), turned to him and said: “that you, my son, had saved me and brought me out is all very good, but I want to eat some good skin.” Huaguang asked: “What is good skin? I do not know what you mean.” His mother replied: “If you do not know, ask Qianliyan 千里眼 (see all) and Shunfeng'er 顺风耳 (hear all) [demon kings that Huaguang converted and enlisted in a previous chapter].” He asked the two, who replied: “By good skin she means people. She is bent on eating people again.” Huaguang heard this and turning to his mother, said: “You suffered torments in Fengdu, and your son exerted all his scheming to rescue you from there – how can you still want to eat people? This cannot be!” His mother replied: “How unfilial! If I cannot eat people, what good did it do to bring me out?””⁴⁶

Indeed, how to understand Huaguang's rescue mission to save his cannibalistic monstrous mother from the obviously well-deserved torments of hell? How should we interpret Huaguang's filial devotion to an ungrateful malevolent being, for whom he wreaks havoc across heaven, earth, and hell?

The *Tale of Huaguang* takes a radically different approach toward the netherworld, and the entire cosmos in fact, than the narratives discussed above. Of course, Huaguang himself is worlds apart from the saintly Sa Shoujian or Guanyin, or even the somewhat ambiguous demon-

⁴⁶ This dialog is taken from the chapter “Huaguang Descends to Fengdu Three Times” (Huaguang sansia Fengdu 华光三下酆都), from *The Tale of the Heavenly King Huaguang, the Emperor of Five Manifestations* (*Wuxian lingguan dadi Huaguang tianwang zhuan* 五顯靈官大帝華光天王傳), later known as the *Journey to the South* (*Nanyouji*), published by Yu Xiangdou circa 1600. For more information on this work and its publishing history, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to this work as the *Tale of Huaguang*.

queller Zhong Kui. Huaguang is as fickle, unpredictable, volatile, and captivating as the fire from which he evolved. According to legend, Huaguang was originally a flame of the lamp in front of the Buddha's altar that became animated after hearing the teachings of Buddhism. His character in late Ming fiction reflects his cultic origins, rooted in three different traditions: the cults of the Wuxian 五顯, Wutong 五通, and Marshall Ma 馬元帥. The cult of the Wuxian, literally "the five manifestations," emerged in the Wuyuan area and became a canonized, transregional cult by the Ming. The Wutong cult is rooted in popular reverence of a type of nature demons (*shanxiao*); it was practiced across southern China, especially by mediums and independent practitioners, and was branded an illicit cult by the state and Daoist institutions. The cult of Marshall Ma was advocated by the Daoist clergy as "a powerful antagonist and an orthodox image of those "demonic gods.""⁴⁷ During the Ming, the distinctions between the three traditions began to blur. The ambiguous and multifaceted Huaguang of the *Tale of Huaguang* and contemporaneous narrative and drama works reflect elements from these three cults.⁴⁸

In the *Tale of Huaguang*, Huaguang leads a strange and amusing life of wild recklessness, despite his generally good intentions.⁴⁹ When he lends his help to others, whether

⁴⁷ Angelika-Ursula Cedzich, "The Cult of Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction: the religious roots of the *Journey to the South*," in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: five studies*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, distributed by IEAS publications, University of California, 1995), p. 139.

⁴⁸ Although *Tale of Huaguang* is the only narrative wholly devoted to Huaguang, he also appears briefly in a number of late-Ming works, including *Origin Story of Zhenwu*, *Shuihu zhuan*, and *Fengshen yanyi*.

⁴⁹ Huaguang in general and this origin narrative in particular have not attracted much scholarly attention so far. The most comprehensive work on Huaguang and his origin narrative is Cedzich, "The Cult of the Wu-t'ung," pp. 137-218. Other studies include Lin Guiru 林桂如, "Zhong shen zhi yan: cong Nanyouji doubao hui kan wanming chuban wenhua zhong de zongjiao Xinyang" 众神之宴: 从"南游记"斗宝会看晚明出版文化中的宗教信仰 (*Zhongguo yanze yanjiu tongxun*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2010), pp. 105-120; Feng Ruchang 冯汝常, "Yiyang danao tiangong, liangzhong butong jieguo: Sun Wukong yu Huaguang danao tiangong zhi bijiao" 一样大闹天宫, 两种不同结果: 孙悟空与华光大闹天宫之比较 (*Huaihai gongxueyuan xuebao*, vol. 8, no. 7, 2010), pp. 23-26.

they be helpless victims of a malicious deity or his own mother, his actions always result in chaos, earning him a universal reputation of a dangerous troublemaker. His journey to hell is similarly chaotic and unordered; Huaguang struggles to enter the netherworld with trickery and deceit, quarrels with everyone from the boatman on the Naihe River to King Yama, and finally whisks his mother from it with a ruse, defying the administration of hell. Despite his laudable motivation to save his mother, his descent to hell is unwarranted and disruptive, and its result – as we see above – is not entirely positive. Not only that, but Huaguang’s mother’s sinfulness drives him to commit more mayhem as he struggles to find a cure for her cannibalistic appetite in the following chapters, landing him in further trouble with the heavenly authorities. The language and pace of the narrative here matches the figure of the mischievous Huaguang: lighthearted, humorous, and somewhat iconoclastic. In sum, while his journey to hell is consistent with his character as a trickster god, it stands in stark contrast to those of other origin narratives.

How did we get here? Huaguang’s search for his mother takes up nearly half the narrative and serves as the main force driving the plot forward. It is this quest to find his mother that motivates Huaguang to roam the land, disrupt heaven and hell, wage battle against the divine pantheon, burn temples, assume the appearances of others, steal, and entangle himself in hilarious troubles. Huaguang’s adventures in the netherworld occupy chapters 14-17, the four chapters leading up to the final conclusion of the narrative in chapter 18. The position of this section within the narrative’s outline correlates that of the other origin narratives we have discussed earlier.

However, the *Tale of Huaguang* strays from its fellow origin narratives on several points. First, the landscape of the netherworld and its inhabitants is not described in the narrative at all;

only key landmarks such as the River Naihe and Yama's palace are mentioned in passing, but they are not described. Second, there is no trace of the didactic and moralizing portrayals of hells that we encounter in other origin narratives. Clearly, the focus here is not placed on educating the reader regarding the structure of hell and the laws of karmic retribution, but quite the contrary: the narrative uses the netherworld as background for comical effect. Most importantly, Huaguang's journey through netherworld is fundamentally disruptive, going against the administrations of both heaven and hell, bringing chaos to the very order icons like Zhong Kui and Sa Shoujian sought to preserve and protect. Yet considering that the entire trajectory of the narrative constitutes a series of disruptions on Huaguang's part, the picture changes: his descent to hell could be regarded as the epitome of his reckless behavior, his greatest adventure/disruption of them all. The term *nao* 鬧, to disrupt or cause mayhem, appears in five chapter titles and recurs over two dozen times in the narrative itself. In this sense, we might regard Huaguang's descent to hell as a "final test," in which he proves beyond doubt how wild he can be – to such an extent that Sun Wukong and Nezha, both appearing in the narrative as well, seem compliant and meek in comparison.⁵⁰

But first Huaguang must ascertain where his mother is, to which end he questions anyone from deities and immortals to ghosts and the Kings of hell. In many ways, Huaguang's quest for his mother reads like a parodical inversion of the acts of other protagonists of origin narratives. On his first arrival at the realm of the dead, he quarrels with the boatman who ferries him across

⁵⁰ Nezha is sent by the divine authority to combat Huaguang in chapter 11; although Huaguang manages to escape, Nezha steals his treasures weapon, a three-cornered golden brick. This golden brick is one of Nezha's iconic weapons; see Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God: the Chinese Nezha and his Indian Origins* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2015), p. 84. The relationship between Huaguang and Sun Wukong deserve a study of its own. Sun Wukong appears in chapter 17, when Huaguang disguises as Sun Wukong and steals immortality peaches from the garden of the Mother Queen of the West. Sun Wukong appeals before the Jade Emperor, claiming his innocence, and then goes to fight Huaguang. Eventually, the Buddha brokers peace between Huaguang and Sun Wukong, who acknowledge each other as brothers.

the Naihe River; while Huaguang believes that his mother, Lady Xiao (萧太婆), is one and the same as the Mother Goddess Jizhituo (吉芝陀圣母), the boatman insists that they are two different individuals. When Huaguang is granted an audience with King Yama, this quarrel repeats itself, almost verbatim, doubtless for comical effect. It is only when Huaguang comes face to face with the real Lady Xiao in the netherworld that he finally discovers the bitter truth: poor Lady Xiao was murdered and eaten by the monstrous Jizhituo, who assumed her identity and gave birth to five children.⁵¹ Huaguang discovers, to his horror, that he is the son of a cannibalistic shapeshifter. The names of the mothers are an ironic wordplay on the duality of good and evil: the good Lady Xiao (literally “miserable / dejected”) is devoured by the evil Jizhituo shengmu (literally “the mother goddess of auspicious sesame bank”). This fact, however, does not dampen his aspiration to rescue his mother, though it reveals that extracting her from hell would pose a significant challenge.

And a challenge it indeed proves to be. Huaguang is not allowed to enter Fengdu (unlike other protagonists, who are always welcomed there), and must resort to schemes and ruses. After consulting with his wife, the Iron Fan Princess (鐵扇公主, an obvious allusion to *Xiyouji*), he decides to disguise himself as a messenger from the court of the Jade Emperor. The guards of Fengdu suspects him and bring out a “demon-reflecting mirror” (*zhaomo jing* 照魔鏡), which reveals his true identity, forcing him to escape.⁵² On his second attempt, he takes on the disguise

⁵¹ The story of her pregnancy and birth echoes the Indian saga *Mahabharata*. In chapter 8 of *Tale of Huaguang*, the mother gives birth after twenty months of pregnancy to a ball of flesh. The terrified husband orders the servants to destroy it, first by drowning it and later by burying it in the ground, but in vain. Eventually, a traveling monk reveals that the ball of flesh contains five children, whom he brings out. The names of the five children all contain the character xian 顯, an obvious allusion to the legend of Wuxian / Wutong, which is the basis for the Huaguang myth-cycle.

⁵² Regarding the “demon-reflecting mirror” and “sin-revealing mirror” in Chinese fiction and religious practice, see Ganany, “Baogong as King Yama,” pp. 57-61.

of a heavenly general, but the guards do not fall for this ruse either. Nevertheless, by eavesdropping on their conversation, Huaguang learns what a heavenly general truly looks like, and on his third attempt produces a much more convincing disguise, which the guards do not suspect. It is only after Huaguang leaves with his mother that the guards take out the mirror again and discover, to their great dismay, that Huaguang tricked them. Alas, by then he is long gone.

Heroic as his quest may be, Huaguang is no savior. Notably, the eschatological efforts of Guanyin and Sa Shoujian to save the souls of the dead are contrasted here by Huaguang's cynical use of people's souls and hell for the purpose of finding and rescuing his mother. For instance, in chapter 8, Huaguang conducts a ritual for the dead and chants scriptures in order to summon some "hungry/lonely ghosts" (*guhun* 孤魂) – not to help them, but only to interrogate them regarding the whereabouts of his mother! This somewhat ridiculous scene echoes ironically the abovementioned ritual to feed "hungry ghosts" that concludes Sa Shoujian's origin narrative. Similarly, when Huaguang manages to break into Fengdu on his third attempt, he pays no attention to the souls of others and does not put any effort into saving anyone other than his own mother.

How then should we interpret his filial piety? Huaguang's quest ironically invokes the story-cycle of the monk Mulian rescuing his mother from hell.⁵³ Although both Huaguang and Mulian descend to hell to save their sinful mothers, their cases could not be more different. First, the saintly monk Mulian presents a profoundly different hero than the mischievous and supernaturally powerful Huaguang, whose figure owes more to the demonic than the divine. Second, the sins of Huaguang's murderous, cannibalistic mother eclipse the mundane sins of

⁵³ Late-Ming readers were familiar with different versions of the story-cycle of Mulian rescuing his mother in writing, temple culture, ritual, art, and performance. See essays by David Johnson, Kenneth Dean, Ch'iu K'un-liang, Kristofer Schipper, Gary Seaman, Stephen Teiser, and Beata Grant in Johnson ed., *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual*.

Mulian's mother, making the entire enterprise much harder to justify. Third, their journey through the netherworld follows a completely different trajectory: Mulian is warmly welcomed in hell and his revelatory tour serves obvious educational purposes. By contrast, as mentioned earlier, Huaguang struggles to gain an unlawful entry to hell, where his journey is not revelatory or didactic at all, but consists of a series of absurd adventures. The only thing Huaguang and Mulian share is the virtue of filial piety.

Notwithstanding the ironic and humoristic treatment of the trope of the son rescuing his mother from hell in *Tale of Huaguang*, the narrative raises some poignant questions regarding the relationship between the Confucian mores of filial piety and the mechanisms of karmic retribution. There is no doubt within the narrative that Huaguang's aspiration to save his mother is laudable; it is praised by the divine authorities whom Huaguang defies, and it is this attribute of filial piety that paves his way toward canonization at the end of the narrative. But at what cost? The violent and deceitful methods that Huaguang employs to rescue his mother are repeatedly criticized in the narrative, even as they are treasured by the reader for their captivating and comical storytelling. Furthermore, does filial piety trump the law of karma? Huaguang's mother is not only guilty of the sins for which she is sentenced to suffer in hell, but she also intends to continue her dangerously evil conduct even after she is emancipated. Ultimately, the *Tale of Huaguang* presents an inverted, carnivalesque journey-through-hell story that serves the same narrative function of concluding an origin narrative, while invoking ironically the Mulian theme and pitting filial piety against the karmic laws of the netherworld.



Figure 26: Huaguang meets King Yama in hell, from *Tale of Huaguang*

6. Visuality of Hell

The cinematic visions of the netherworld with which origin narratives captivate their readers echo representations of hell in late-imperial ritual, visual, and material cultures. Visual depictions of hell played a particularly crucial role in the formation of the popular conception of the netherworld since medieval China at the latest. The conflation of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian ideas that characterized the Chinese netherworld in late imperial times is already evident in the Dazu rock carvings in Chongqing (重慶大足石刻), the earliest of which date back to the seventh century AD.⁵⁴ Many of hell's famous landmarks also date back to the Tang and Song; the infamous “mountain of knives” and “forest of swords” that we see in late-Ming

⁵⁴ Regarding the Dazu rock carvings, see Chongqing Dazu shike yishu bowuguan 重慶大足石刻藝術博物館, *Dazu shike diaosu quanji* 大足石刻雕塑全集 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1999); Angela Falco Howard, *Summit of treasures: Buddhist cave art of Dazu, China* (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill, 2001).

narrative texts (as well as in contemporary popular culture) already appear in an early-Tang cave at Dunhuang.⁵⁵ Following the Tang, visual depictions of hell became a prolific arena for artistic and religious imagination that combined pornographic horror, humor, and didactic moralizing.

Visual depictions of hell fulfilled numerous concomitant functions among the clergy and the laity. In addition to their artistic and entertainment values, hell images were also used for educating the public about the mechanisms of retribution and the afterlife, for meditative visualization practices, and for rituals conducted for the benefit of both the living and the dead. As Teiser notes, already during the Tang, images of the netherworld were used by the Buddhist clergy in sermons for the laity and in mortuary rites.⁵⁶ Visual depictions of the netherworld were regarded as an effective tool for religious conversion, similarly to medieval miracle tales.⁵⁷ The act of copying famous pictures of hell was likewise valued as a meditative tool and a way to accumulate merit. Importantly, hell paintings were not only static representations of the netherworld, but also had *performative* functions; during the Tang it was believed that pictures of hell (or visual recreations of one's experiences in hell) had a direct impact on the fate of the individuals who were then in hell, and on whose behalf the painting was commissioned. Hell paintings "involved a blending of the vital energy of both donor and painter in creating a product that was efficacious rather than accurate."⁵⁸ In general, accuracy in portraying hell was less important than the emotional impact of the *experience* of hell that the images inspired in the

⁵⁵ See Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel: painting of rebirth in medieval Buddhist temples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 126.

⁵⁶ Teiser, "Having Once Died and Returned to Life," pp. 445-452.

⁵⁷ Teiser quotes the telling example of Zheng Jing'ai, who withdrew from secular life and became a Buddhist monk after viewing temple murals depicting the netherworld. See Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, p. 127.

⁵⁸ Teiser, "Having Once Died and Returned to Life," pp. 442-443.

viewer. For this reason, images of hell that were based on first-hand experiences were valued more highly than those based on hearsay.⁵⁹

Visual representations and narratives about the netherworld were mutually influential in medieval and late-imperial China. While it is often difficult to determine to what extent images of hell inspired storytelling or the other way around, it is evident that they were closely intertwined. For instance, a tenth-century mural at Yuli depicting Mulian's journey through the netherworld corresponds closely to the narrative of the abovementioned Dunhuang *bianwen* text of *Mulian Saving his Mother*.⁶⁰ Sawada Mizuho stressed that “transformation scenes” (*bianxiangtu* 變相圖) had a profound impact on textual representations (both doctrinal and popular) of the netherworld since the Tang.⁶¹ At the same time, narrative and dramatic depictions of hell also reshaped their visual representations in temple murals and scripture (both canonical and popular).⁶² Images and narratives also went hand in hand in public settings, where storytellers and clergy alike used visual aids when enthralling their audiences with stories of the netherworld.

⁵⁹ Ibid, pp. 440-441, 455-456.

⁶⁰ Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, p. 126.

⁶¹ Sawada Mizuho, pp. 143-144. Regarding “transformation scenes,” see Hung Wu, “What is Bianxiang? On The Relationship Between Dunhuang Art and Dunhuang Literature” (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, June, 1992), pp. 111-192.

⁶² A telling example of the impact of narratives on the visuality of hell is the iconography of King Yama, which was transformed by the popular narratives about judge Baogong, with whom he was increasingly identified during the Ming and Qing. See Ganany, “Baogong as King Yama.”



Figures 27-28: the fifth court of hell, from the Vidor Collection.⁶³

Late-Ming origin narratives echo this longstanding mutual influence in visual and narrative depictions of hell, both in their content and physical format. As I showed in previous chapters, the picture-above-text type of illustration (*shangtu-xiawen*) that characterizes most origin narratives creates an *imagetext* that enables a form of book consumption which merges reading, viewing, and visualizing. It is important to remind here, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, that the history of *shangtu-xiawen* illustrations in late-imperial commercial publishing is rooted in religious book culture.⁶⁴ This connection between religious practice and popular culture underlies late-imperial imagination of the netherworld, forming the conceptual basis for origin

⁶³ *Ten Kings of Hell: the Vidor Collection* (Taipei: The National Museum of History, 1984), p. 60, 69.

⁶⁴ See Berezkin, “Illustrations of the Mulian Story and the Tradition of Narrative Painting in China (Tenth-Fifteenth Centuries)” (*Religion and the Arts*, vol. 20, no. 1-2, 2016), pp. 16-17; Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, p. 173.

narratives. The *shangtu-xiawen* illustrations of hell in origin narratives follow closely earlier and contemporaneous images of the netherworld, though in general they are more modest in scope and less pornographic in their portrayal of underworld tortures (see figures 23, 25, 26).

Interestingly, the majority of the illustrations focus on the protagonist and not on those suffering in hell; many of them show the protagonist meeting the Kings or talking to his guide, crossing a bridge or entering a gate, or simply looking towards the tormented, whom we cannot see – only read about. These illustrations and the text below clearly rely on the reader-viewer's familiarity with other depictions of the netherworld.

Origin narratives make an interesting distinction between the courts of the Ten Kings and the hells where their punishments are performed, that is, between the judicial and executive branches of the netherworld, so to speak. This separation is maintained both in the narrative and in the illustrations that accompany it above: the protagonist is first granted an audience in the court and meets its King, and afterwards visits the hell attached to it, where the dead are tormented according to the sins they committed in life. The administrative and punitive aspects of hell are thus spatially separated, literally and visually. This was not always the case in other depictions of the netherworld in late-imperial China. For instance, in different editions of the *Yuli chaozhuan* 玉曆鈔傳 from the Song to the Qing dynasty, a single image contains both the administration and the punishments associated with a specific court within the same spatial framework. In the *Yuli* illustrations, the King and his administrative staff take up the upper part of the image, while the scene of punishment and torturing the sinners occupies the lower part (see figures 27-28).⁶⁵ Why did origin narrative separate the judicial and administrative sections

⁶⁵ Neal Donnelly, *A journey through Chinese hell [Chung-kuo ti yü chih lü]: "Hell scrolls" of Taiwan* (Taipei: Artist publishing, 1990); *Ten Kings of Hell: the Vidor Collection* (Taipei: The National Museum of History, 1984).

of the netherworld from its areas of punishments and torture? It is unclear, but considering that origin narratives (along with other late-Ming narrative texts) advocated a conceptualization of the netherworld as a just realm subordinate to heaven, it is very likely that the publishers sought to distance the courts of hell, seen as incorruptible and fair, from the cruelty of the punishments they prescribed. Put differently, in order to maintain a view of the netherworld bureaucracy as a neutral force enacting the laws of karmic retribution, it was necessary to separate them from the horrors of hell torments.



Figures 29: a netherworld court and tortures in hell, from *Origin Narrative of Zhong Kui*

Yet those very horrors are precisely what attracted audiences to stories and images of hell, in China as elsewhere. Hell provided a tantalizing spectacle, feeding audiences' sadistic hunger as well as their need for moral and social reassurances. In origin narratives, both the protagonists and the readers play the role of spectators in the world of the dead.

7. Conclusions

The case studies above provide us with three perspectives of the hagiographical trope of journey through hell. Through Zhong Kui's eyes we gain a comprehensive, almost textbook, view of the netherworld, from its physical landscape to the structure of its underworld administration. Here the bureaucratic metaphor reigns supreme; Zhong Kui's main concern during his inspection tour is overseeing the correct functioning of the courts and their hells, maintaining order, and guarding against malfeasances. The altruistic and self-redemptive journey of Sa Shoujian through the netherworld turns our attention to the experiences of the souls of the dead in hell. In the course of Sa's unabashedly didactic and moralizing tour, the reader's attention is divided between empathy toward the suffering souls and horror, tinged with voyeuristic curiosity, at the gory tortures they must endure. In Huaguang's case, we follow the path of one individual on a personal quest – a son determined to snatch his mother from the jaws of hell. Here, our main concern is neither the bureaucracy of the netherworld nor the rest of humankind who suffer in hell; rather, our attention is focused on the success of a mission that is both laudable for its motivation (filial piety) and reprehensible for its methods (causing mayhem) and results (freeing a cannibalistic monster who refuses to mend her ways).

The trope of journeys through hell plays a key narrative role in the origin stories of late-Ming cultural icons. In most cases, this trope is a new addition to the protagonists' myth-cycles, and is therefore a special feature of origin narratives as a genre. The elaborate journeys through hell also set origin narratives apart from the rest of late-Ming literary depictions of the netherworld, which are nearly always brief and non-informative. While the purpose and specific characteristics of this netherworld tour might change from one origin narrative to the next, it

invariably serves as a final test for the protagonists that qualifies them to assume their destined position – whether as a savior deity, an immortal, or a divinely-sanctioned exorcist. Moreover, their descent to hell and re-ascent to earth mirrors the overarching structure of the entire narrative as marked by a descent to the human world and re-ascent to heaven. In other words, the protagonists' journey in the human world, which propels the trajectory of their origin narrative, is mirrored by their chthonic journey through hell. The underlying motif of travel that characterizes origin narratives in general is further highlighted by these netherworld tours, a journey within a journey.

But what does travel (*you* 游) mean exactly in this context? Naturally, the associations of leisurely voyage that the term *you* usually inspire are somewhat out of place here. Nevertheless, this tour of hell complements the other journeys that the protagonists embark on, and follows the same general aim of self-cultivation – another stage in their development. Despite its sinister context, this journey provides yet another chance for the protagonists to explore the cosmos (geographically and conceptually) and advance their own skills and knowledge. In this sense, their travel through the netherworld is profoundly different from the journey undertaken by the rest of mankind after death: a perilous journey forced upon them, filled with uncertainty and nearly always torturous and agonizing, ending with a much-feared sentence that determines their next incarnation. For our protagonists, who leave the netherworld unscathed, this voyage is constructive, not destructive; it echoes depictions of journeys through hell in medieval miracle literature in its emphasis on the educational and illuminative effect of the journey, for both the traveler and the audience of the tale. In sum, for the protagonists, travel is once more portrayed as the ultimate means for exploration of the universe (geography of the underworld) and the self

(personal cultivation). For the reader, the travel-narrative represents an efficient vehicle for religious instruction.

In accordance with late-Ming popular conceptualizations of karmic retribution, the netherworld we encounter in origin narratives is marked by an aspiration for balance, as well as by the motifs of duplication, parallelism, and repetition. These powerful narrative effects take several shapes. The overarching parallel, of course, is that of the bureaucracy of the netherworld, which mirrors the earthly and heavenly administrative systems. Although the courts of the netherworld are subject to the divine and human administrations, they also function as a countermeasure for their shortcomings by compensating for their injustices and malfeasances, thus representing the only truly effective judicial system in the cosmos. Moreover, not only are the torments of the dead weighed against their sins (often quite literally), but the very landscape of the netherworld is based on this balancing effect: offices of the virtuous and unvirtuous face each other in parallel rows, hells are duplicated and divided into sub-hells, bridges corresponding to the deeds of mankind run parallel to each other across the River of Blood, and the punishments the souls suffer repeat themselves in excruciating cycles of pain. These duplications, parallelisms, and repetitions bring a certain degree of order and consistency to this dark realm, while painting it with seemingly endless and inescapable despair.

The cinematic portrayals of hell in origin narratives open another window onto the popular imagination of the realm of the dead in late Ming. Although they draw on the longstanding tradition of hell imagery in Chinese religious art and book culture, origin narratives usually present a “cleaner” view of the netherworld that separates the administration of the underworld from the hells where sentences are carried out. At the same time, the reader’s familiarity with hell paintings seems to be taken for granted, even relied upon. This preexisting

knowledge of the visuality of hell complements and enhances the effect of the narrative and the modest illustrations that accompany it. As discussed above, the visual emphasis of the descriptive narratives that characterizes these works is supplemented by the picture-above-text illustrations. These *imagetexts* create an immersive experience that brings a new sense of immediacy and realism to the motif of journey through hell.

What can we learn from these hell journeys about late-Ming book consumption and the reading experience of these origin narratives? First, it is imperative to remember the broader cultural and religious context within which these books were read. Stories and depictions of journeys through hell were widely used in late-imperial China in ritual dramas and mortuary rites, particularly in southeast China. Not only that, but the journey through hell was sometimes reenacted by religious practitioners, most often a spirit-medium, as part of the funerary ritual.⁶⁶ In ritual, the narrative, visuality, and performative aspects of the trope of the journey through hell are mutually constructive. Origin narratives draw heavily on ritual traditions surrounding death and assume the reader's familiarity with them. The didactic and moralizing character of these informative journeys through hell reveals their close connections to other contemporaneous popular texts about karmic retribution and the netherworld, primarily *baojuan* and *shanshu* treatises. The reading experience of origin narratives might have fulfilled multiple functions: as a form of entertainment, an aid for domestic reverence of the protagonists, a tool for visualization practices, and above all a vehicle for religious instruction and self-education about the netherworld and the afterlife. In this respect, origin narratives belong to a larger corpus of pious literature that provide a broad lay audience – an audience that had no access to canonical or

⁶⁶ Kenneth Dean, "Lei Yu-sheng ("Thunder is Noisy") and Mu-Lien in the Theatrical and Funerary Traditions of Fukien," in Johnson ed., *Ritual Opera, Operative Ritual*, pp. 48-49.

doctrinal texts, nor the ability to understand them – with crucial information about life, death, and the afterlife.

Lastly, journeys through hell in origin narratives had a lasting impact on the reverence of these protagonists on the one hand and the popular conceptualization and depiction of the netherworld on the other. As mentioned above, Zhong Kui's journey through hell was introduced into his lore by his late-Ming origin narrative, and has since then become a mainstay of his myth-cycle, appearing in Qing-dynasty *xiaoshuo* works and artistic portrayals of the famous demon-queller. Although origin narratives were themselves inspired by earlier depictions of netherworld tours to some degree, their narration style and format provided a model for later popular works about the realm of the dead. For instance, the various renditions of the *shanshu* book *Diyu youji* 地獄游記, including its twentieth-century comic-book versions, owe much to late-Ming origin narratives.⁶⁷ Furthermore, some origin narratives still maintain their relevance to religious practice today; the *Tale of Huaguang*, for instance, was still distributed free of charge in temples dedicated to the Wuxian in the 1980s.⁶⁸ In sum, these journeys through the netherworld highlight the special place that origin narratives occupy in the history of narrative writing and lay practice in late-imperial China.

⁶⁷ *Diyu youji* 地獄游記 (Taizhong: Sheng xian tang zazhi she, 1986).

⁶⁸ Cedzich, p. 141.

Conclusion

Books are curious things. Their bound leaves, heavily laden with ink-imbued words and images, are worldly portals to the otherworldly. Liminal objects, they concomitantly exist in both realms, tangible thresholds to the beyond. Origin narratives celebrate extraordinary people who do extraordinary things, yet they are deeply rooted in the mundane “world of dust,” which gives them function, purpose, and meaning. At the core of these hagiographic books are the earthly lives of their protagonists. Their greatest achievement, the thing that makes them worthy of their predestined deification, is the assistance they provide to ordinary people – whether by protecting them from demons and monsters, or by inspiring and instructing them to seek the Way. At the same time, it is ordinary people, the audiences of origin narratives, who bring these iconic protagonists to life by consuming these books, relishing their narratives, and using them as references for a variety of worship practices. Yet, as the tastes and habits of their audiences change over time, so do these books. As the world around them changes, their function, purpose, and very meaning change as well.

The Wanli period in late Ming was an exciting time in the history of Chinese narrative writing, print culture, and lay reverence. It was the interplay between these three forces that fueled the origin-narrative vogue around the turn of the seventeenth century. While in many ways origin narratives were a localized, temporal phenomenon, their influence continues to be felt across the cultural landscape of China and the wider sinosphere even today. Cultic worship of the protagonists of origin narratives embraced these books in different ways during the past three hundred years. Not only are certain origin narratives still sold or distributed free of charge in temples of these icons in contemporary China and Taiwan, but current views of the icons’ lives, iconographies, and their relationship to the practices, sects, and doctrines that they came to

be associated with are deeply indebted to late-Ming origin narratives. Some origin narratives were officially embraced by religious institutions; the origin narrative of Jigong, for instance, was canonized around the turn of the twentieth century.¹ Furthermore, the impact of these works in the realm of book culture was also felt after their late-Ming vogue declined, particularly in *xiaoshuo* narrative writing and in popular “religious” writing, such as *shanshu* and *baojuan* works. In terms of *xiaoshuo* narrative writing, origin narratives can be regarded as “distant ancestors” of Qing-era supernatural adventure tales and knights-errant narratives (*wuxia* 武俠). This complicated relationship, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation but deserves a study of its own, is partially responsible for the skewed and somewhat anachronistic modern view of origin narratives as “fantastic fiction” or “novels of gods and demons.” However, as I argued in this dissertation, origin narratives were not confined to the realm of leisurely reading nor to that of “fiction,” but covered a wider swath of the cultural spectrum in late Ming. As Chinese book culture changed after the mid-seventeenth century, these different readings and extra-literary functions were obscured by new tastes and habits.

Back in late Ming, origin narratives emerged out of three concomitant trends in the world of commercial publishing: the rise of “vernacular” *xiaoshuo* narrative writing, a penchant for collating and anthologizing, and a renewed interest in hagiographies, or life stories. As I showed in the previous chapters, origin narratives mold a diverse body of preexisting materials into the format of *xiaoshuo* narrative text, thus creating a comprehensive portrait of the protagonist. There is little in the content of origin narratives that is truly original; their composition is primarily that of collating, of bringing together all aspects of the protagonist’s lore that the

¹ The *Recorded Sayings of the Recluse from Qiantang Lake, the Chan Master Crazy Ji* (*Qiantang hu yin Jidian chanshi yulu* 錢塘湖隱濟顛禪師語錄) was canonized in a Japanese extension of the traditional canon, the *Dai Nihon zokuzōkyō* 大日本續藏經, under the title *Jidian Daoji chanshi yulu* 濟顛道濟禪師語錄 (ZZ 2, 26/1: 1a-23b).

author or editor saw relevant, and weaving them into the tapestry of the protagonist's life story. The hybrid textual composition of origin narratives reflects this process of compilation.

For the general lay reader, origin narratives also represent a watershed in the access they provide to specialized knowledge – historical, doctrinal, liturgical – that was previously the purview of the literati and clergy. Similarly to contemporaneous encyclopedias and compendia, origin narratives reflect a shift in the circulation and consumption of knowledge in late Ming that was made possible by commercial publishing. As Deng Zhimo remarks about his Saints Trilogy, these works were products of research that were meant to be correct and informative, and to be appreciated for their comprehensiveness above all else. In this respect, they were also regarded as presenting genuine – not fictitious – information about their protagonists. The *imagetext* effect of the books' illustrations and their overall visual emphasis through descriptive narration also contributed to the iconographic perception of their protagonists; in this sense, they are *hagiographies*. In their extensive scope, their use of the *xiaoshuo* format, and their visual emphasis, origin narratives ushered in a new stage in the history of the Chinese hagiographical *imaginaire*.

The developments in print culture that fueled the Wanli-era vogue of origin narratives also coincided with a particularly fertile period in the history of their protagonists' reverence and cultural significance. As I discussed in the previous chapters, this period marked a highpoint in the institutional and lay veneration, as well as imperial patronage, of the cults of Xu Xun, Zhenwu, and Lü Dongbin.² It is also during this period that we encounter these cultural icons in an unprecedented wide variety of cultural and media outlets, from art and material culture to

² While in this dissertation I focused on these three icons, other protagonists of origin narratives experienced a similar wave of popularity during this period. The lay reverence of Guanyin, for instance, entered a new phase in late Ming, parallel with the growing popularity of her cult center in Mount Putuo. See Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: the Chinese transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), and Marcus Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin: Mount Putuo and its Gazetteers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

drama and narrative texts. Origin narratives fed into this heightened interest not only by drawing comprehensive and entertaining portraits of these icons within the main narrative, but also by providing news about their temples and practical information for their worship in their prefaces and appendices. Yet origin narratives were not just books about these cultural icons; they formed bridges to these extraordinary individuals, a roadmap of their “traces” that allowed the reader-viewer to feel closer to them and interact with them in the real world. Reading origin narratives was thus an inseparable part of their popular reverence.

The three case studies in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 demonstrated the role that origin narratives played in reshaping the relationships between what I term the *Three Ps* that underlie the popular conceptualization of cultural icons: their Persona, the Places that they came to be identified with, and the Practices and doctrines that they were associated with. As I argued in Chapter 2, in *The Iron Tree*, Deng Zhimo created a captivating and encyclopedic portrait of Xu Xun in narrative form that integrated the teachings and practices of the Jingming Daoist sect into his life story. Not only did Deng Zhimo create a cinematic and engaging narrative from a host of preexisting lackluster hagiographies, but he also integrated doctrinal materials concerning Daoist self-cultivation that were previously inaccessible to most readers. Moreover, *The Iron Tree* tied the various strands of his multifaceted legend – from his ancient lore as a local water deity to his position as the patriarch of the Jingming Dao – into a causal and logical plotline that presented a unified vision of the famous immortal. Thus, by weaving doctrinal and ritual information into origin narratives while presenting new interpretations of this information and its ties to the protagonists’ lore, the authors and publishers of these books were in a unique position to shape the laity’s perception of the relationship between the icons and the practices that came to be associated with them.

Origin narratives were also topo-creative texts wherein hagiography and geography were closely connected. As I argued in Chapter 3, origin narratives map the sacred geography of their protagonists in narrative form, presenting a holistic vision of the relationship between the icon's life story and the places that are central to his or her lore. These places are not merely a backdrop for the adventures of the protagonists, but they are created or reshaped through the protagonists' process of becoming the cultural icons late-Ming readers knew and cherished. In the case of Zhenwu, the narrative depicts how his self-cultivation efforts physically transformed the landscape, flora, and fauna of Mount Wudang. After Zhenwu's deification, the temples and monuments built in his honor, as well as the crowds of pilgrims who flocked there to worship him, further reshaped the mountain in his image. Through its retelling of Zhenwu's life story, *Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North* provided a cipher and a roadmap to Zhenwu's sacred geography. Thus, it was through the lens of Zhenwu's spiritual and exorcistic journeys in this book that clergy and laity across social strata came to understand Mount Wudang. In this sense, origin narratives functioned as topo-creative texts that had a profound and lasting impact on China's imagined cultural geography.

Above all, origin narratives are a shrine to the protagonist's legend in narrative form, renegotiating the connection between his or her persona(s) and hagiograph(ies). Whether in Guanyin's filial self-sacrifice or Zhong Kui's fearless demon-quelling, it is the conjoining of the protagonist's trademark characteristics with his or her specific life story that creates the cultural icon. As I discussed in Chapter 4, origin narratives also form bridges to the protagonist's own person, allowing the reader-viewer to come closer to these icons and even nurture personal relationships with them. As Deng Zhimo notes in his prefaces to his Saints Trilogy, his books lay out the "traces of the immortals" for the reader to follow in their footsteps. In the case of Lü

Dongbin, Deng claims that the immortal himself is found in his “traces,” and even more so in his writing and poetry. Lü Dongbin’s “autobiographical” accounts and poems thus provide access not only to his persona, but also to his own person – by forming a bridge between the reader and the immortal himself, mediated by writing. This “transcendental camaraderie” between Lü Dongbin and his readers is furthered by the practice of spirit writing, which proliferated in late Ming in different social circles, even beyond the ranks of the literati elites. Spirit writing not only brought the immortal’s own voice to his admirers, but it did so in a personalized manner, usually in a domestic setting. As the appendix of *Tale of the Eight Immortals* reflects, the messages were revealed not to a public, but to specific people. Moreover, this interaction was not one-sided; contemporaneous *biji* reveal that some admirers used spirit writing to conduct real, reciprocal conversations with Lü Dongbin. When origin narratives like *The Flying Sword* and *Tale of the Eight Immortals* gave precedence to Lü Dongbin’s own writing in their portrayals of the immortal, especially his writing about himself, they cemented the bond between his person, his persona as a roaming bard, and his life story.

Beyond their hagiographic mission, origin narratives also put their stakes in ongoing lay discourses about the correct path to enlightenment, or spiritual attainment. Two recurring debates in particular underlie most origin narratives: the first concerns the importance of asceticism versus social and familial duty, whereas the second concerns morality and the workings of karmic retribution.

In regards to the question of asceticism, the origin narratives I discussed in the case studies in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are located in different places on that spectrum, representing different models of spiritual attainment. The *Origin Story of Zhenwu of the North* propagates a view of self-cultivation that places asceticism as a necessary requirement for attainment,

supporting reclusion and physical austerities, abstinence from all sexual activity, and complete severing of one's ties to family and society. By contrast, origin narratives celebrating Lü Dongbin like *The Flying Sword* and *Tale of the Eight Immortals* paint a more complicated picture. As a patriarch of the Quanzhen sect and a roaming immortal, Lü Dongbin is technically required to follow a strict ascetic regimen. Nevertheless, some of his most famous escapades include consorting with women, including tempting a maiden into a sexual relationship that nearly kills her (as he gradually absorbs her *yang* force during intercourse). Moreover, one of Lü Dongbin's key characteristics is his legendary consumption of alcohol, and some of his most iconic poems are described by the narratives as written during drunken stupors. At the far end of the spectrum is the filial immortal Xu Xun, who remains committed to his family and society at large throughout his life story. Not only is Xu Xun described as the ideal public servant in his position as magistrate, but he is also portrayed as a filial son and brother, a family man who takes his wife and children along on his journeys even after he "leaves the world" to pursue spiritual enlightenment. Yet his worldly attachments do not hinder his progress in the Way, quite the contrary. When Xu Xun finally proves his mettle and completes his journey, he ascends to heaven together with his entire household, including his dogs and chickens!

Moral responsibility and the workings of karmic retribution underlie origin narratives in general, but they particularly come into the spotlight in their descriptions of journeys through the netherworld. As I argued in Chapter 5, while descents to the netherworld were a popular recurring motif in late Ming drama and narrative writing, origin narratives elevated this trope to new heights, providing the longest and most elaborate portrayals thus far of journeys through hell. In origin narratives, the protagonists' journeys through hell are constructive for their own life trajectory as they are beneficial to others. It is through these netherworld tours that the

protagonists showcase the skills and capabilities that will allow them to become the icons they are destined to be, whether these skills be bureaucratic (Zhong Kui), eschatological (Sa Shoujian, Guanyin), or chaotic (Huaguang). Despite the morbid nature of these journeys, they all end with positive outcomes, as the protagonists provide some kind of benevolent service to others, either by correcting malfeasances in the netherworld courts, delivering suffering souls, or rescuing one's family members from the clutches of hell. But the real purpose of these journeys is clearly to present to the reader-viewers a thorough portrayal of the netherworld that elucidates what happens after death and translates the mechanisms of karmic retribution into specific (and graphic!) scenarios. These revelatory and didactic depictions of hell attest to the overarching educational mission of origin narratives, while underscoring their affinity to *baojuan* texts and *shanshu* treatises. Furthermore, their detailed descriptions of mortuary rituals highlight their instructional and practical functions as sourcebooks intended for a broad lay audience.

Invariably, origin narratives are books of travel. Voyaging, or *you* 游, underlies origin narratives structurally, thematically, and conceptually. The protagonists' worldly and otherworldly journeys frame their entire life stories, from before the cradle to beyond the grave. The basic framework of origin narratives relies on a circular voyage that begins and ends in the celestial realm. The overarching structure of these books as marked by a descent to the human realm and re-ascent to heaven is mirrored within the narratives by parallel travels, such as the protagonists' journeys through the netherworld.

Thematically, it is these journeys that allow the protagonists the opportunities to prove their worthiness of their predestined roles – to demonstrate their benevolence by helping mankind and showcase their exorcistic abilities and divine superiority by subduing demons, evil spirits, and illicit gods. Their voyages do not end after their ascension, or the conclusion of the

book; the narratives reiterate that the protagonists will continue their travels to the end of time – whether by returning periodically to ensure the safety of mankind (like Xu Xun), descending to the human world to eradicate demons or conduct inspection tours of the land (Zhenwu), or simply continuing their carefree roaming across the different realms for their own enjoyment (Li Dongbin). At the same time, the narratives are also read as invitations and roadmaps for real-world travel, or pilgrimage, as the protagonists’ geographical voyages echo those of their mortal admirers, who are inspired by their life stories to follow their “traces.”

It is also in the course of their geographical travels that the protagonists embark on their spiritual quests for immortality, Daoist attainment, or Buddhist enlightenment. Self-cultivation, these books argue, is made possible only through perpetual travel, which symbolically mirrors one’s progression on the path to attainment. The geographical travels of origin narrative protagonists are nearly always as abstract as their spiritual paths. The protagonists rarely travel to specific, pre-considered destinations; more often than not, they are depicted as simply “roaming,” following wherever their feet take them. The narratives repeatedly imply that these are not so much voyages to places as they are journeys to another state of being. It is this spiritual transformation that lies at the heart of origin narratives.

There is still much to be explored in regards to origin narratives and the Chinese hagiographical *imaginaire* that remains beyond the scope of this dissertation. What brought on the intense interest in life stories during late Ming? Why did the commercial-publishing vogue of origin narratives decline after the mid-seventeenth century? What changes occurred in book culture and narrative writing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that transformed reading habits? In addition to these important questions, the impact of origin narratives in the following centuries on narrative writing and cultic reverence undoubtedly deserves further study.

Beyond the phenomenon of late-Ming origin narratives, the general substream of cultural icons in premodern and modern China (and the broader sinosphere) and the *Three Ps* that support them should be examined further.

The centuries that separate us from the producers and consumers of origin narratives in late Ming prevent us from pursuing an anthropological line of inquiry regarding the conceptions and uses of these books during that time. However, analyzing the narratives themselves and their paratexts – their peritexts (prefaces, appendices, and illustrations) and epitexts (broader cultural and historical context) – provide us with several important clues. Crucially, the narratives and their peritexts reveal that these books were not perceived as “fiction,” but rather as attempts to represent truthful and useful depictions of cultural icons. Furthermore, origin narratives enabled several concomitant types of reading, or book consumption. First, as captivating illustrated stories, often dotted by verse, these books were highly *entertaining*. But pastime enjoyable reading was not their only function. Origin narratives were also *informative* texts that consolidated a swath of materials pertaining to their protagonists into their life stories. In this sense, origin narratives were encyclopedic portrayals of cultural icons that functioned as reference works, or sourcebooks, to their lore and worship.

Moreover, similarly to contemporaneous compendia, origin narratives had practical applications, and could have been used as ritual manuals and worship guides. In addition, the consumption of origin narratives was not a passive endeavor, detached from the world of action. Rather, origin narratives enabled *performative* reading, in the sense that reading had an impact on the world beyond the text. This effect is twofold – first, the act of consuming these books transformed the readers through didactic instruction and outlaying paths for self-cultivation. Second, as encyclopedic hagio-graphical worship aids, they had talismanic and devotional

effects – consuming them was an aspect of real-world action, in the same frame of reference as ritual and pilgrimage. Origin narratives were thus part of a larger cultural continuum wherein the boundaries between art, entertainment, history, and worship were blurred. In this context, reading constituted reverence.

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Appendix: An Incomplete Table of Late-Ming Origin Narratives:

Title	Author	Publisher/ Publishing House	Year	Peritexts
<i>Newly Carved Narrative of the Jin-era Xu of Jingyang Attaining the Dao and Capturing the Dragon, the Iron Tree (Xin qie Jindai Xu Jingyang dedao qin jiao tieshu ji 新鍬晉代許旌陽得道擒蛟鐵樹記)</i>	Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨	Yu Siquan 余泗泉 (some believe to be Yu Xiangdou 余象斗),	1603	Some full-page illustrations. Preface by Deng Zhimo
<i>The Story of Lü Chunyang Attaining the Dao, the Flying Sword (Tangdai Lü Chunyang dedao Feijian ji 唐代呂純陽得道飛劍記)</i>	Deng Zhimo	Cuiqing tang 萃慶堂 (run by Yu Xiangdou), Jianyang 建陽, Fujian	Wanli era	Some full-page illustrations. Preface by Deng Zhimo
<i>The Story of the Perfected Sa of the Five Dynasties Attaining the Dao, the Enchanted Date (Wudai Sa zhenren dedao Zhouzao ji 五代薩真人得道咒棗記)</i>	Deng Zhimo	Cuiqing tang	Wanli era	Some full-page illustrations. Preface by Deng Zhimo
<i>Origin Tale of the Eight Immortals and their Journey to the East (Baxian chuchu dongyou ji 八仙出處東遊記 / Shang dong baxian zhuan 上洞八仙傳)</i>	Wu Yuantai 吳元泰	Yu Xiangdou (signed Yu Wentai 余文台), Shuang feng tang 雙峰堂	Circa 1600	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations, preface, appendices
<i>The Complete Account of Zhong Kui of the Tang (Tang Zhong Kui quanzhuan 唐鐘馗全傳)</i>	Unknown	Anzheng tang 安正堂	Wanli era	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations,

<i>Newly Carved, Complete Account of the Origins of the Sage Master Kong (Xin qie Kongsheng zongshi chushen qunazhuan 新鐫孔聖宗師出身全傳</i>	Unknown	Feng Mengzhuan 馮孟顛 or Feng Zhenqun 馮貞群, in Cixi county 慈溪, Zhejiang	Wanli era	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations, inscriptions (銘), appendices (附錄)
<i>The Origin and Cultivation Narrative of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of the Southern Sea (Nanhai Guanshiyin pusa chushen xiuxing zhuan 南海觀世音菩薩出身修行傳</i>	Xida wuchen zouren 西大午辰走人 of Nanzhou 南州; edited by Zhu Dingchen 朱鼎臣; carved by Yang Chungong 楊春恭		Wanli era	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations, last page is a full-page portrait of Guanyin
<i>The Origin Narrative of Bodhidharma Passing the Light of the Buddha (Damo chushen chuandeng zhuan 達磨出身傳燈傳)</i>	Li Quan 麗泉	Mr. Yang 楊氏, Qingbai tang 清白堂, Jianyang, Fujian	Wanli era	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations
<i>The Narrative of the Twenty-Four Arhats Attaining the Dao (Ershi zun dedao luohan zhuan 二十四尊得道羅漢傳)</i>	Zhu Xingzuo ed. 朱星祚	Qingbai tang, Jianyang, Fujian	Wanli era	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations
<i>The True Biography of the Officially-Recognized Protector of the State and Savior of the People the Divine Madam Lin (Xuan feng huguo tianfei Lin niangniang chushen jishi zhengzhuan 宣封護國天妃林娘娘出身濟世正傳)</i>	Wu Huaichu 吳還初 of Nanzhou ed.; Tu Defu 涂德孚 of Changjiang 昌江 proofread	Xiong Longfeng 熊龍峰, Zhongzheng tang 忠正堂, Jianyang	Wanli era	Cover-page illustration, shangtu-xiawen illustrations, one-page dedication after the back cover

<i>The Account of the Origin of the Dark Emperor of the North, the Venerable Master Zhenwu (beifang Zhenwu zushi xuantian shangdi chushen zhizhuan 北方真武祖師玄天上帝出身志傳)</i>	Yu Xiangdou	Yu Xiangdou, Suangfeng tang	1602	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations, ritual manual
<i>The Tale of the Heavenly King Huaguang, the Emperor of Five Manifestations (Wuxian lingguan dadi Huaguang tianwang zhuan 五顯靈官大帝華光天王傳)</i>	Yu Xiangdou	Yu Xiangdou, Suangfeng tang; also printed by the Juwen tang 聚文堂	Wanli	
<i>The Complete Account of Han Xiangzi (Han Xiangzi quanzhuan 韓湘子全傳)</i>	Yang Erzeng 楊爾曾	Wulin 武林, Renwenju 人文聚, Nanjing, Jiuru tang 九如堂	1623	16 full-page illustrations
<i>Newly Carved Completely Illustrated Narrative Account of Manifestation of the Way and Descending of the Snake, the Journey of the Sea (Xinke quanxiang xian fa jiang she haiyou jizhuan 新刻全像顯法降蛇海遊記傳)</i>	Wugenzi 無根子, active 1573	Zhongzheng tang 忠正堂, Jianyang	Circa 1590-1610	
<i>The Account of Guandi of Past Generations Manifesting his Holiness (Guandi lidai xian sheng zhizhuan 關帝歷代顯聖誌傳)</i>	Mr. Miao ed. 穆世 編刊		Wanli/ Chongzhen era	Temple inscriptions, couplets in temples, temple map, portraits, shangtu-xiawen illustrations
<i>The Account of Tripitaka of the Tang's Journey West (in search of) the Buddha (Tang Sanzang xiyou</i>	Ming Zhuchen 明朱臣	Liu Liantai 劉連台	Wanli	

<i>shi e zhuan</i> 唐三藏西遊釋厄傳)				
<i>The Complete Origin Narrative of Tripitaka of the Tang (Tang Sanzang chushen quanzhuan</i> 唐三藏出身全傳)	Yang Zhihe 陽至和 ed.			Shangtu-xiawen illustrations
<i>Newly Carved Completely Illustrated Narrative of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid (Xinke quanxiang niulang zhinü zhuan</i> 新刻全像牛郎織女傳)	Zhu Mingshi 朱名世	Yu Chengzhang 余成章	Wanli	Shangtu-xiawen illustrations
<i>The Recorded Sayings of the Recluse from Qiantang Lake, the Chan Master Crazy Ji (Qiangtang hu yin Jidian chanshi yulu</i> 錢塘湖隱濟顛禪師語錄)	Shen Mengpan 沈孟栻	Sixiang gaozhai 四香高齋, Hangzhou	1569	Full-page portrait of Jigong, preface