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MEETING THE CELESTIAL MASTER

史 Benjamin Penny

In 1880 the British consular official E. H. Parker, at that time based in Canton, met Zhang Renzheng 張仁晟 (1820–82), the *tianshi* 天師, or Celestial Master, the sixty-first to have held that title in what is claimed to be an unbroken lineage from the traditional founder of Daoism as an organised religion, Zhang Daoling 張道陵.¹ Looking back twenty years later, Parker wrote:

... a certain Chang Tao-ling, born about the time Jesus Christ died, was a later prophet of Taoism [compared with Laozi], and he is supposed to have “ascended into Heaven” upon or from a mountain called Lung-hu Shan [龍虎山] in Kiangsi 江西 (a place of which I was almost in sight on my inland journey from Foochow to Wenchow 溫州 in February 1884). His descendants have been alternately honoured and ignored by successive dynasties, and their souls are supposed to pass from one generation to another by a sort of metempsychosis, like the souls of the Lamas in Tibet. The Manchu dynasty has consistently ignored them at court, and in 1742 even deprived them of court rank; but in 1747 Kienlung [乾隆] accorded them buttons (local) of the fifth grade, in consideration of their ecclesiastical status.

Well, in 1880 the hereditary “Pope” Chang Jen-cheng visited Canton in state, and I went to see him in his travelling barge. The Chinese officials ignored him utterly, regarding him much as we regard a gypsy or a Dulcamara.² He was dressed very much like any other official Chinaman, but he had a quiet, passionless, and unworldly look about him, and was very well bred. He appeared to be a man of forty, and said he was the sixty-first in descent. His usual designation is Chang T’ien-shi (Celestial Teacher Chang); but his own official title is that given to him in 1739, *Cheng-yih Ta-chen-ren* [正一大真人] (*verus unus, magnus purus vir*). He spoke to me very kindly, and said he knew the Rev. Joseph Edkins, then a Protestant missionary;—still living, and a distinguished sinologue. At my request he wrote me a “charm,” which I had framed. I took it with me to Chungking, and, at Chang-erh’s suggestion, hung it in my private “court” to ward off danger. We forgot all about it; but, when

The three texts discussed in this article were first noted by Holmes Welch in “The Chang T’ien Shih and Taoism in China,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 4 (1957–58): 188–212, at 188. I would also like to acknowledge the help and insightful critiques of Gillian Russell and Lewis Mayo in the preparation of this article.

¹ For an account of the life of Zhang Renzheng from within the Daoist tradition see Fu Qinjia, *Zhongguo Daojiao shi* [The history of Chinese Daoism] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), pp.93–4 which reprints the biography from the 62nd Celestial Master Zhang Yuanxu’s 張元旭 *Bu Han Tianshi shijia* [A supplement to the genealogy of the Celestial Masters since the Han] of 1918. See also Li Shuhuan, *Daojiao yaoyiwenda jicheng* [Questions and answers on the essentials of Daoism] (Gaoxiang, 1971), pp.153–4.

² “Dulcamara” was slang for a quack in the second half of the nineteenth century. The term derives from a character of this name in Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* who used the herb bittersweet—also known as dulcamara.

³ E. H. Parker, *John Chinaman and a few others* (London: John Murray, 1901), pp.68–9. Parker (1849–1926) entered the Chinese Consular Service in 1868, retiring from the service at the age of forty-six due to ill health. He later became Professor of Chinese at Owens College, Manchester, a post created for him. See P. D. Coates, *The China consuls: British consular officers 1843–1943* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988), and T. H. Barrett, *Singular listlessness: a short history of Chinese books and British scholars* (London: Wellsweep Press, 1989), pp.79–80. Barrett describes Parker as “a prolific but resolutely mediocre scholar”. Chang-erh was Parker’s longtime servant, see *John Chinaman*, pp.344–7. The riot concerned occurred in 1881 and is described on pp.100–7 of *John Chinaman*.

I was *not* killed during the riot, the Chinese said: “Ah! how clever! It was the *Taoist* charm that saved him!” (Q.E.D.)³

Parker, and the Reverends Hart and Edkins whose writings are discussed below, were among the first foreigners to have met this, or any, Celestial Master but they were certainly not the first to have encountered the notion that there was an hereditary lineage of Daoists who exercised some sort of authority in the religion. By 1880, the missionary and consular communities could have been reading accounts of Daoism for over fifty years in the journals published along the China coast and in the memoirs, travelogues and descriptions of expatriate Europeans. Much of this literature on its history, its philosophical classics, and some of its temples exhibits the misunderstandings and confusions characteristic of first encounters where representatives of one culture meet with aspects of another culture quite alien to them. In these cases the dynamic of understanding—into which categories the alien phenomena are made to fit—is in some ways more revealing of the mentality of the

observers than it is of their subjects. As far as analysing this material is concerned, then, it is of little importance whether the observations of Parker, Hart and Edkins are historically accurate or not; strictly speaking, this essay is not a study of Chinese religion. Its purpose is, rather, to offer an interpretation of some accounts of a particular facet of one Chinese religion, the institution of the Celestial Master lineage and its sixty-first incumbent. The interpretations will focus on the language of the writers, on some of the terminology they use, on their choice of literary form; they will, in particular, refer beyond the immediate text under consideration to the cultural world of its readership.

The two Britains and the Canadian discussed here are distinguished not only by their meeting Zhang Renzheng in person but by their reactions to him, and to the Daoist religion in general. The broadly accepted position on these topics by writers in English can be represented by the opinion of the Revd W. Soothill, a noted scholar of Chinese religions himself. This is what he wrote in 1912:

Time fails to tell in detail the downfall of Taoism. Instead of limiting itself to the mysticism of its master, and pursuing its reasonable speculations, it gave itself up, at an early date to the magical side of Chinese philosophy and practice A charge of wizardry and magic cannot be laid at the door of Laocius [Laozi 老子], and it is a pity that the lofty moral and spiritual teachings of Laocius and Chuang-tzu [莊子], teachings equal if not superior to those of the Buddha, proved beyond the capacity of their successors From the days of Chang Tao Ling, whose

Figure 1

E. H. Parker's servant Chang-êrh (source: Parker, *John Chinaman and a few others*, *frontispiece*)



descendant still rules as Taoist Pope in China, the principle occupation of the Taoist priest has been that of wonder-working . . .

This man, more than any other, was the cause of the debacle of Taoism.⁴

What this passage makes clear is that knowledge of the Zhang lineage was placed into a pre-existing model of the history of Daoism. The broad outlines of this history can be summarised in these terms. At the head of the religion was Laozi, a rationalist philosopher who taught a pure doctrine to a coterie of devoted, thoughtful, disciples. After Laozi passed to the west, leaving behind his text of perfect enlightenment, his followers and their followers gradually diluted his message. At the same time, elements of vulgar superstition crept in and perverted the doctrine. According to this narrative, the debased religion practised by the common people of China thus bore little resemblance to the original. A crucial turning point in Daoist history occurred, then, with the first claim to “revelation”—that to Zhang Daoling from the

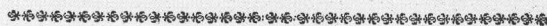
⁴ W. E. Soothill, *The three religions of China* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913), pp. 80–2. See also E. H. Parker from his *China and religion* (London: John Murray, 1905): “In the year 147 an emperor came to the throne who was very fond of music and also had a great liking for the mysteries of Taoism and Buddhism. In order to compete with Buddhism, Taoism (which from a Chinese point of view resembled Buddhism in many points such as its democratic spirit, its humility, contempt of riches, its tranquillity, and self-sacrifice) had gradually degenerated more and more from the severe old model, and had had to reconstitute itself in the popular form under the first of the Taoist ‘Popes’ who have continued in an unbroken line down to this day” (p. 79). The best summary of the present state of knowledge on the history of Daoism is Isabelle Robinet (trans. Phyllis Brooks), *Taoism: growth of a religion* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). The relationship between the Laozi, the Zhuangzi and the later religion of Daoism is still a live issue in Daoist studies.



DESCRIPTION DE LA CHINE

E T

DE LA TARTARIE CHINOISE.



De la Religion des Chinois.



Il y a trois principales Sectes dans l'Empire de la Chine. 1^o. La Secte des Lettrez, qui suit la doctrine des anciens Livres, & qui regarde Confucius comme son Maître: 2^o. La Secte des Disciples de Lao kiun, qui n'est qu'un tissu d'extravagances & d'impiétéz. 3^o. La Secte des Idolâtres, qui adorent une Divinité nommée Fo, ou Fœ, dont le culte fut transporté des Indes à la trente-deux ans après la mort de Jesus-Christ.

RELIGION
DES
CHINOIS.
Diverses
Sectes, &
quelles
sont les
principales.

Chine environ
Tome III.

A

La

Figure 2

Opening page of the chapter on Chinese religion in volume 3 of Jean-Baptiste du Halde's *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de L'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*, from the edition published in 1736 by Henri Scheurleer, La Haye

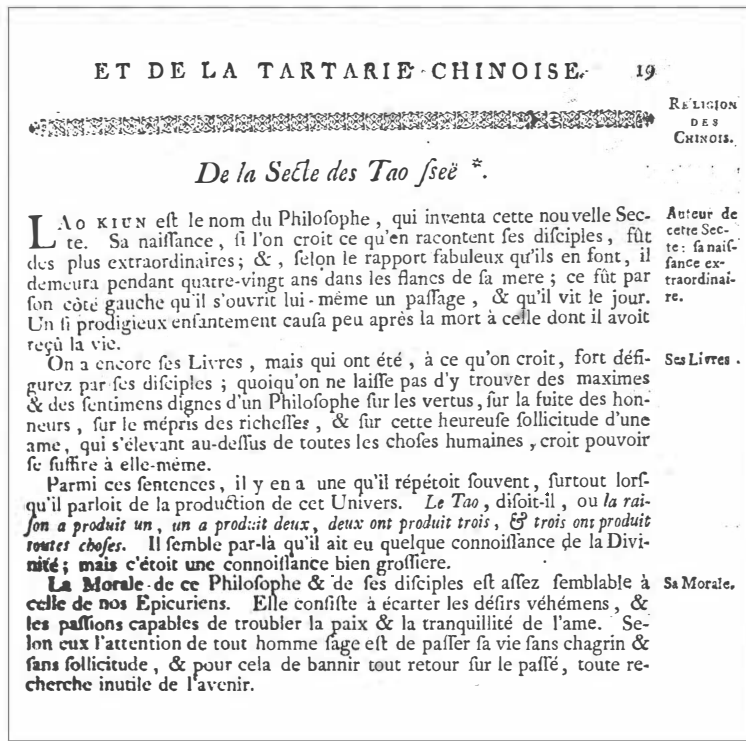


Figure 3

Extract from the section "De la Secte des Tao sseë" in volume 3 (p.19) of du Halde's *Description de la Chine* ...

⁵ J-B. Du Halde, *The general history of China* (London: J. Watts, 1741), vol.3, p.30. On Du Halde and his monumental work editing material from the French Jesuit missions see Paul Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp.185–7. On the editorial history of the *General history* see John Lust, *Western books on China published up to 1850* (London: Bamboo Publishing, 1987), pp.3–5.

⁶ Du Halde, *General history*, p.31.

deified Laozi in the Later Han. It was at this point that access to the pure message of Laozi was interrupted and a mediator was first installed. That mediator claimed a new dispensation, so this history claims, and deluded the credulous through trickery and superstition. The position of this mediator and his descendants—the Celestial Master lineage—at the head of their church had remained unchallenged ever since, ruling over a deluded populace with a perverted doctrine.

A version of this historiography can already be seen in the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's (1674–1743) influential essay "Of the sect of the *Tao sseë*" in his *General History of China* (1735, translated into English in 1741):

The Morality of this Philosopher and his Disciples is not unlike that of the *Epicureans*; it consists in avoiding vehement Desires and Passions capable of disturbing the Peace and Tranquillity

of the Soul; and according to them, the Attention of every wise Man ought to be, to pass his Life free from Solitude and Uneasiness, and to this end never to reflect on what is past, not to be anxious of searching into Futurity."⁵

The primary source of disturbance, Du Halde contends, is the fear of death and as a result, "they boast of inventing a Liquor that has the Power of rendering them immortal."⁶ The religion developed around these practices and accreted superstitions

until, under the Emperors of the Dynasty of *Tang*, they gave the Ministers of this Sect the honourable Title of *Tien sseë*, that is *heavenly Doctors* The Successors of the Head of this Sect are always honoured with the Dignity of Chief Mandarins, and they reside in a Town of the Province of Kiangsi where they have a magnificent Palace. A great Concourse of People flock thither from the neighbouring Provinces to get proper Remedies for their diseases, and to learn their Destiny, and what is to happen in the remainder of their Lives, when they receive of the *Tien sseë* a Billett filled with Magical Characters, and go away well satisfied without complaining of the Silver they pay for this singular favour ...

These *Tao sseë* were the Persons who introduced into the Empire the multitude of Spirits till then unknown, whom they revered as Deities independent of the Supreme Being, and to whom they gave the Name of *Chang ti* [上帝]; they even deify'd some of the ancient Kings and paid them divine Homage.

This abominable Sect in time became still more formidable by the Protection of the Princes, and by the Passions of the Grandees whom it flatter'd, and by the Impressions of Wonder or Terror that it made upon the Minds of the People.

The Compacts of their Ministers with Demons, the Lots which they cast, the surprising Effects of their Magical Arts infatuated the Minds of the Multitude; and they are still extremely prejudiced in their Favour; these Imposters are generally called to heal Diseases, and drive away the Demons.

They sacrifice to this Spirit of Darkness three sorts of Victims, a Hog, a Fish, and a Bird; they drive a Stake in the Earth as a sort of a Charm, and trace upon Paper odd sort of Figures, accompanying the Stroke of their Pencil with frightful Grimaces and horrible Cries.⁷

It is hard to escape the impression that Europeans in China at the beginning of the nineteenth century travelled with a copy of Du Halde's *General History*—or one of the several books that rely on it, directly or through intermediaries, as a significant source⁸—so often are Du Halde's observations uncritically repeated. Nevertheless as more, and more skilled, observers wrote of what they saw, and perhaps of more importance of what they were told (as they acquired Chinese language skills), the reliance on Du Halde became less apparent, and new models were invented as the appeal to a now obsolete authority waned. However, in the case of Daoism in particular, clarity did not come easily despite the fact that many nineteenth-century western observers of Chinese religions in general and Daoism in particular were very fine indeed.

Some of the best observers were missionaries. Of course, for them the question of what Chinese people believed had a real and urgent importance. If the millions of souls in China were to be saved, attempts to find out what their religions had to be made, in order to bring to them the message of Christ. So, matched with the uncertainty about what they saw, was a supreme certainty in their cause and often a deep knowledge not only of semitic religions but also those religions of Asia that had been encountered before, and written about in western languages. It was understandable, then, that when foreigners, particularly missionaries, encountered religious phenomena that were unknown to them, they fell back on to terms, metaphors, and images that they had brought with them.

Thus, while in one sense it seems unremarkable that Parker, and many before him, designated the Celestial Master lineage, the Daoist papacy—for an English Protestant, the Roman Popes were an obvious example of a religious lineage near to hand—in another this terminology is revealed as far from neutral. For these writers, and their intended readership, these are words loaded with sectarian meaning. For them to draw the parallel between the Celestial Masters and the Roman Popes was also to claim that respect for the Celestial Master and Daoism in its religious mode was as misguided as respect for the Pope and his idolatrous form of Christianity.⁹ Laozi's Daoism was revealed to be pure, rational and original, like Protestantism, while the

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.32–3.

⁸ See, for instance, J-B. G. A. Grosier, *A general description of China* (London, 1788), W. Winterbotham, *An historical, geographical, and philosophical view of the Chinese empire* (London, J. Ridgway, 1795), and H. C. Sirr, *China and the Chinese*, 2 vols (London: Wm. S. Orr, 1849).

⁹ Nineteenth-century Protestant writers were no kinder to Buddhism, frequently damning it as “idolatry”—thus putting it in the same category as Roman Catholicism. More direct are Murray, Crawford, et al: “The Romish missionaries were particularly struck with the great similarity between the ritual of this [Chinese Buddhism] and of their own worship; so that some, whose religion was only superficial, could scarcely perceive any distinction. It may be remarked, however, that the features in which this resemblance consists, are those which the Protestants reject as unwarranted by scripture,—the burning of incense, the worship of images, and particularly of a female with a child in her arms, called the Universal Mother, and who much resembled the Madonna,—the extensive monasteries, in which professors of both sexes immured themselves, abandoning their relations and the world,—the stringing and counting of beads, and even the coarse robe bound with cords, worn by the chiefs of the monastic orders.” *An historical and descriptive account of China*, vol 2 (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1836). Also relevant is Henry Charles Sirr: “We were especially struck by the similitude of the mode of worship adopted by the Chinese Buddhists and that of the Romish Church; the Chinese and Romish priests alike read a service in a language unknown to the people; and to pursue the similitude, the priests walk up and down before the altar, numbling [sic] over the service with great rapidity, using many bowings and genuflexions, ringing a hand-bell at stated intervals . . . The priests, or bonzes, are a dissolute, depraved, ignorant set . . .” *China and the Chinese*, vol.2, p.170.

¹⁰ For certain Roman Catholic writers to use the term “Pope” to refer to the Celestial Masters was absolutely unacceptable. For instance, in his “La Papauté et les Papes Taoïste” (*Science catholique* [1891], pp. 889–905), Charles de Harlez explicitly rejects the use of the term, a position also held by Henri Doré, SJ, in *Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine*, vol. 9 (Shanghai: T’uswei Printing Press, 1915). The Roman Catholic response will be taken up in more detail in a future essay.

Figure 4

Zhang Daoling (source: Yuedantang xianfo qizong heke [Collected engravings of the wondrous traces of Immortals and Buddhas from the Hall of the First of the Month], compiled by Hong Yingming 洪應明 of the Ming, reprinted Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1989, p. 61)



later, religious, Daoism of the Celestial Masters was regarded as diluted, superstitious and debased, like Roman Catholicism.¹⁰

But in other respects, the use of the term “Pope” is surprising. In Parker’s writing he demonstrates his knowledge of the Celestial Master’s “own official title” (in English, the Great Realised Man of Orthodox Unity), in which year Zhang Renzheng’s predecessor received it and (by implication) that one of his primary roles was the writing of protective talismans. He relates the broad outline of the story of Zhang Daoling, the site of his ascension and some details of the relationship of the lineage with the Qing court. Finally, and in some ways most revealing, he draws an equivalence between the inheritance

of the Zhang lineage with the reincarnation of Tibetan lamas. Parker demonstrates here that none of the features of the Celestial Master lineage are really like the Roman Papacy at all, yet Zhang Renzheng is still the Daoist “Pope.”

However, Parker equivocates: he refers, after all, to the Taoist “Pope” not the Taoist Pope. The inverted commas signify a questioning of the term, an uneasiness; it is clear that there remain for Parker suspicions that the Daoist (and perhaps even the Pope in Rome?) may, after all, be strangely powerful. Parker begins the passage under consideration by stressing the powerlessness of Zhang and his predecessors and viewing them as an administrative problem: the Manchu state ignored them “and in 1742 even deprived them of court rank,” only acquiescing slightly five years later “in consideration of their ecclesiastical status.” The current incumbent was ignored “utterly” by the local officials and regarded him “much as we regard a gypsy or a Dulcamara.” Yet, in a tone that hovers uneasily between sobriety and humour, Parker implies that the charm the Celestial Master writes appears to have saved his life. This passage works as discourse on the basis of this unexpected, if flippant, reversal of expectation. Zhang may well not be the ordinarily dressed, quiet, passionless and unworldly, yet well-bred, curiosity that he appears. He exceeds the possibilities of a bureaucratic explanation. Beneath the assured tone of the British official lurks, perhaps, a suggestion that his dismissal of Zhang may have been hasty.

In 1879, the year before E. H. Parker spoke with Zhang Renzheng in Canton, the Canadian missionary, the Revd Virgil C. Hart published an article entitled “The Heavenly Teachers” in *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*. In it, Hart describes a visit he

made to Longhu Shan during which he also met the sixty-first Celestial Master.

The first half of the article summarises the received narrative of the genealogy, conception and birth of the first Celestial Master, Zhang Daoling, continuing by recounting the events of his life, his “translation to Heaven” at the age of 123 and the subsequent lineage. The second half describes his meeting with Zhang Renzheng, and the temples of Longhu Shan. Between the two is a linking passage in which Hart first relates the location of Longhu Shan and the beginnings of his journey there. Then follows this passage:

It was 4 p.m. when we entered the beautiful little vale, which winds, enclosed snugly by low mountains, a distance of 21 *li*. The valley in places is not more than three hundred feet wide, and widens again to a thousand. A tiny stream coursed its way from side to side, fringed by wild plum, willow and bamboo, presenting a most charming appearance. We were but 29 *li* from the king, and his supreme palace; for the teacher and his Yamen [衙門] are thus designated in this quarter. All the circumstances of the occasion impressed me with a sense of mystery. The fantastic forms that many of the little mountains assumed, and the weird aspect that settled upon every object as the sun went down, brought to mind that we were near the fountain head of the great sorcerers [*sic*] power. Baskets, well laden with printed scrolls fresh from the blocks, passed us. These suggested the magic pen and seals, secreted from the world, but holding in bondage to suspicious fears thousands of rich and poor all over China. Over this road, without doubt, passed the first teacher with his great company of disciples, looking on every hand for a suitable site, where the powers of nature would combine to bless them. If the object of the founder was to keep the arts a mystery from the world he could not have found a better place. If, on the other hand, the essenic idea was dominant in the choice, here are grottoes, rocks and almost impenetrable retreats where those semi-ascetics could mature their intricate arts without annoyance from the “dusty world.” Eight *li* from his residence, we exchanged our beautiful little valley for a wide and very fertile one, fed by a wide, swift running river, flowing from the boundaries of the Fookien [福建] province. At the lower end of this valley, was situated the first temple of the order, just at the foot of Tiger mountain. The scenery in the immediate vicinity of the palaces is grand in the extreme, not surpassed by anything that I have seen in China. No wonder the elder teacher here laid aside his staff and erected his altar, and upon his departure for Sz-chuen [四川] secreted his mysterious literature with the full determination of making this an everlasting retreat for his followers and family.¹¹

In the context of Hart’s article, this passage draws the reader from the historical past to the narrative present, from Zhang Daoling to Zhang Renzheng, from the first to the sixty-first. As Hart and his party move closer to the present Celestial Master, they reenact the passage of the first—“Over this road, without doubt, passed the first teacher with his great company of disciples”—and in this mood of anticipation he debates, in his writing, whom it is he will meet. “We were but 29 *li* from the king, and his supreme palace,” Hart writes, “for the teacher and his Yamen are thus designated in this

¹¹ Revd V. C. Hart, “The heavenly teachers,” *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* 10 (Nov.–Dec. 1879): 445–53, 448–9. “Heavenly Teacher” is Hart’s translation of *tianshi*.

¹² Here, Hart is directly translating the word *gong* (宮)—a common term for a Daoist temple but which normally means “palace”.

¹³ C. D. Ginsburg, “Essenes,” in *The dictionary of Christian biography*, ed. W. Smith and H. Wace (1877–87; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1967), pp. 198–208, at 208.

quarter.” And it is the question of designation to which I would like to turn.

In the sentence just cited, the Celestial Master is referred to as “the king” who lives in his “supreme palace” and also as “the teacher” who has a “Yamen.” A *yamen* was the name of a local governmental office compound in late imperial China—teachers did not normally have them. A few lines on and Hart tells us that they were approaching “the fountain head of the great sorcerers [*sic*] power” and a little later, in the sentence cited above, Zhang Daoling is described in terms that could only have reminded the readership of *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* of another first teacher with his retinue. Zhang is next designated as “founder” and then as “essenic.” Zhang’s followers were also, apparently, “semi-ascetics” who practised “intricate arts.” The first building Hart and his companions come across is the “first temple of the order” but by the next sentence “temples” have become “palaces.”¹² Finally, in this rich mixture, in an echo of the “great sorcerer” Zhang Daoling appears to have become Prospero: “No wonder the elder teacher here laid aside his staff and erected his altar.”

Already in the first references—“king,” “teacher,” “Yamen”—there is a sense that competing images are standing uncomfortably side by side, the Imperial, the pedagogical, and the bureaucratic. This competition continues in the next two references—“sorcerer,” “first teacher”—referring to the magical and to the messianic. The jostling representations seem to point to the writer experiencing an excess of metaphoric possibilities as he enters what appears to be enchanted land: phrases such as “a sense of mystery,” “fantastic forms,” “weird aspect,” “fountain head,” speak of Longhu Shan as a zone set off from mundane humanity where strange and wondrous things can be seen, yet in which there is a sense of threat, a suggestion of entrapment.

Thus, the Celestial Master’s centre at Longhu Shan is specifically imagined as an Essenic community of semi-ascetics and as Prospero’s enchanted island, as well as, less specifically, a generalised secluded site for mystical or magical practice and teaching. But there is, as I hope to demonstrate, a link between these apparently disparate representations.

Prospero and the Essenes appear an odd conjunction but in the later nineteenth century the distance between them was thought narrower than it seems today. The Essenes were, with the Pharisees and the Saducees, one of the Jewish sects of the centuries around the time of Christ. They have become well-known in recent decades as possible inhabitants of the Qumran site associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, at the time Hart was writing, the main sources on the Essenes were Josephus and Philo, and a serious scholarly literature on them had existed from the 1820s.¹³ Whether they were a distinct sect or whether, as Ginsburg maintains, they were simply the strictest branch of the Pharisees, the Essenes were thought to have led an ascetic existence, living apart from the world in communities, adhering to a strict interpretation of the Mosaic law. Their lives of purity, holiness and devotion to God were thought to enable them to perform prophecy and

magical cures including exorcism. Theirs was, in other words, a version of Judaism whose goals, in part, echoed some of the powers ascribed to the Celestial Master. And as Ginsburg relates, “When it is remembered that the whole Jewish community at the advent of Christ was divided into three parties, the Pharisees, the Saducees, and the Essenes, and that every devout Jew belonged to one of these sects, it is natural to suppose that Jesus, who in all things conformed to the Jewish Law, belonged to this portion of His religious brethren.”¹⁴ This is not to say that Christianity was Essenism, simply that for Jesus, according to this version, Essenism was the religious starting point.

Prospero, the “sorcerer” as Caliban refers to him,¹⁵ famously cast aside his magical powers: “... I’ll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / and, deeper than ever did the plummet sound, / I’ll drown my book.”¹⁶ For post-romantic critics of Shakespeare, Prospero’s “Christian” goodness was unquestioned. For Dowden in 1886, “Prospero is the highest wisdom and moral attainment” and later, “Over all presides Prospero like a providence” engendering “the spirit of reconciliation, of forgive-ness, harmonising the contentions of men.”¹⁷ Some forty years earlier, for Hudson, Prospero was, “one of the noblest, grandest conceptions that ever entered into the mind of man.” He is “supernatural morally and intellectually,” his “sorcery is the sorcery of knowledge, his magic is the magic of virtue; all things are aidant and obedient to his wise forethought and his upright will ... He seems, indeed, a sort of human divinity, whose thoughts and aims are so identical with truth and right, that they may be safely allowed to to execute themselves.”¹⁸ Thus for these critics, in the world of *The Tempest* Prospero is uncomplicatedly the embodiment of pure goodness, who directs all beings in that world with supernatural powers but who, at the end, divests himself of them to become one with the rest of humanity.

In this interpretation, referring to the first Celestial Master as being like Prospero, or like an Essene, or like the first teacher, is to point in the same direction, —one in which a reference to kingship is equally reasonable. This positive interpretation of the Celestial Master is of course, very different from that of Parker and Soothill discussed above. Hart also declines (and within the literature it does appear a deliberate choice) to introduce his discussion with a version of the “pure Taoism debased” story. Indeed, he implicitly provides an alternate history: “The ancient writer 邵子, in speaking of Lao Tsz

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁵ *The Tempest*, III.ii (London: Arden Edition, 1975), p. 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, V,1, p.116.

¹⁷ E. Dowden, *Shakespeare* (London: MacMillan & Co, 1886), pp.150–1.

¹⁸ H. N. Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, II (New York: Baker & Scribner, 1848), pp.7–9.

Figure 5

Hart and the Ê-meï Abbot (Source: E. I. Hart, Virgil C. Hart, Missionary Statesman [New York: Hodder, 1917])



¹⁹ Hart, "Heavenly teachers," p.445. Shaozi is probably Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–77), the Song scholar of the *Changes*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.451.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p.453.

and his works, describes the difference between him and Chang Tau Lin in the following sentence, 老子得易之體，留侯得易之用，‘LaoTsz acquired the principles of the Yi (while) the Marquis of Liu, obtained the uses of the Yi’¹⁹ The Marquis of Liu was Chang Liang 張良, the supposed ancestor of Zhang Daoling, the *Yi* 易 are the *Changes* of the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes*. Thus, Zhang Daoling is seen as the inheritor and practical expounder of the pure doctrine, not its debaser.

However, Hart’s attitude to the current Celestial Master is more complex. In this passage he clearly states that “the magic pen and seals, secreted from the world” hold “in bondage to suspicious fears thousands of rich and poor all over China.” But when Hart meets him he is not so fearsome:

In person he is more than medium size, with the air of a person of consequence, at ease with himself, and I should judge upon excellent terms with the good things of this life, and wholly destitute of the ascetic spirit many of his forefathers possessed. At the end of each sentence, the little man presented the pipe to his excellency’s mouth, and he held it while he took long and gratifying whiffs. His dress was that of a high official, and not at all what we had fancied he would wear. We had thought, that one at the head of a great seat, and professing to have control over all evil powers, would, unless, upon parade occasions, honour his office by a dress in harmony therewith.²⁰

Clearly, the lineage is not what it was: this man, it would appear, has become besotted with worldly comforts and opium and apes the earthly bureaucratic powers. For Hart, he is a disappointment and any sense that he would fall under the Celestial Master’s spell is quickly lost. As it turned out, their conversation concerned the less elevated topic of Zhang’s recent trip to Shanghai and the new railway to Wusong. However, to his credit, Zhang does request a picture of Jesus.²¹ Finally, in the last paragraph of the article, Hart appears to attempt to distance the Celestial Master from any possible taint of religious impropriety: “Our impression is that the idolatry of the sect is as meager as possible.”²² “Idolatry” is, of course, also a category into which Catholicism falls.

For both Hart and Parker, meeting Zhang Renzheng was the focus of their writings about the Celestial Master lineage. According to the testimony of the sixty-first Celestial Master himself (as recorded by both Parker and Hart), the Revd Joseph Edkins had also met Zhang Renzheng by the time he wrote his *Chinese Buddhism* of 1880. In the chapter of that book entitled “Buddhism and Tauism in their Popular Aspects,” Edkins discusses the institution of the Celestial Masters Zhang. What distinguishes his account from those of Parker and Hart is that he does not refer to his acquaintance at all:

The power of expelling demons from haunted houses and localities, is believed to belong chiefly to the hereditary chief of the Tauists, Chang T’ien-shi, and subordinately to any Tauist priest. To expel demons he wields the sword that is said to have come down, a priceless heirloom, from his ancestors of the Han dynasty. All demons fear this sword. He who wields it,

the great Tauist magician, can catch demons and shut them up in jars. These jars are sealed with a “charm” (fu) [符]. I have heard that at the home of this chief of wizards on the Dragon and Tiger mountain in the province of Kiang-si, there are many rows of such jars, all of them supposed to hold demons in captivity. The wizard himself is believed to be a power. The charm is a power. The sword he wields is a power. The efficacy of a charm is increased by the supposed magical gifts of the Tauist wizard from whom it is obtained. To secure the services of the great Kiang-si wizard is very expensive. Only the wealthy who can expend a thousand taels of silver without being pinched can afford the luxury of feeling quite sure that, by the agency of this wizard, the demons who trouble them are completely subjugated. The residence of this wizard is called Chên-jên fu [真人府]. In giving him the title Chên-jên, the meaning is that he is regarded as having attained perfect power and virtue. He is the ideal man. Men under the domination of the passions are not called Chên-jên. The Tauist discipline gives a man the rule over himself and over nature. He who possesses this is called a “True man.” The word chên, “true,” cannot be fully translated into English in such cases as this without embracing the ideas “real,” “perfect,” “ideal,” and “most elevated.” It is higher than sien [仙], “immortal,” but not so high as sheng [聖], “holy.”

... ..

This personage assumes a state which mimics the imperial regime. He confers buttons like the emperor. He has about thirty persons constituting his courtiers and high officers. Tauists come to him from various cities and temples to receive promotion. He invests them with certain titles, and gives seals of office to those Tauists who are invested. They have similar powers to his, and can, for example like him, subdue demons by pasting charms on doors, which prevent them from entering. The Chang T'ien-shih, in his capacity as a sort of spiritual emperor, addresses memorials to Yü-ti [玉帝] in heaven. His position will be understood from this circumstance. He is chief official on earth of Yü-hwang-ti [玉皇帝] in heaven, and as such is in the habit of addressing to him “memorials” called piau [表]. His duty is defined as the driving away and expulsion of demons by charms, and their destruction by the magic sword.²³

In this passage, Edkins puts a clear distance between himself and his subject. He does not tell us that they have met, and when he writes, “I have heard that at the home of this chief of wizards on the Dragon and Tiger mountain in the province of Kiang-si, there are many rows of such jars, all of them supposed to hold demons in captivity,” most readers would assume that he had no special access to the man. If Hart’s text finds its model in the literature of first person narrative, Edkins’s looks more like ethnography. And, where in Hart there is a sense of deep personal involvement in the unfolding of the story, in Edkins there is a studious dedication to unselfconscious observation. By adopting the uninvolved and objective stance, Edkins can describe the Celestial Master’s powers as truly awesome, with the proviso that this is not his own belief. The language he chooses to use creates a position that protects him—just as Hart’s allows him a vulnerability.

²³ Edkins, J., *Chinese Buddhism: a volume of sketches, historical, descriptive and critical* (London: Trübner & Co, 1880), p. 387–9. The Rev. Joseph Edkins, B.A., D.D. (1823–1905) arrived in Shanghai in 1848 following ordination at Stepney Meeting the previous year. Edkins had studied at University and Coward Colleges, London, and produced numerous scholarly books and articles as well as the “New Testament in the Mandarin dialect” (1866). He remained all his life in China save for a return to England in 1858–59 when he married for the first of two times, and in 1873–76 during which time he received his Doctorate of Divinity from the University of Edinburgh. See *A register of missionaries, deputations, etc. from 1796 to 192* prepared by James Silbee (Westminster: London Missionary Society, 1923), pp 62–3.

The might of the Celestial Master is represented in this text, then, as radically alien. Rather than a Pope or teacher, here he is the chief wizard of the Daoists, at the head of a community of wizards with his magical sword and magical charms in battle with the infernal world of demons, the most powerful of which only he can subjugate. Edkins's image of the Celestial Master, I want to argue, finds its model in more secular realms than Hart's. Here the Celestial Master is, at least in part, a product of British nineteenth-century medievalism, part of the same cultural matrix in which Tennyson's Arthurian *Idylls* were produced and a little later the images of the pre-Raphaelites. It was also the time of Lady Charlotte Elizabeth (Bertie) Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion*, the Welsh source of much Arthurian material (1849, second edition 1877). This is one stock of representations that Edkins, and his colleagues, would have had to work with and has, in this case, generated an alignment of the Celestial Master with the imagined medieval wizard. One consequence of this alignment is that in considering the power granted to the Celestial Master in the popular imagination, the same suspension of disbelief is allowed in his case as it is with the British wizard of old. This enables Edkins to describe the Celestial Master's powers in some detail while, at the same time, dismissing them. The second consequence is that he represents the superstitious past; he is a relic of an age when the people could still be deluded, an age that has receded, inevitably and blessedly, into mythology. Thus, another space Edkins creates between himself and the Celestial Master is related to time and progress. Victorian medievalism is, after all, a post-enlightenment development, a nostalgic creation that looks back at wizards in enchanted forests from a world of railways and rationality. By representing the Celestial Master in this way, Edkins can describe his powers as he believes the Chinese understand them and simultaneously define them as belonging to a world that his modern mission will render obsolete.

Underlying what I have described is a kind of implicit history, a familiar one of progress and enlightenment and modernisation. But Edkins also addresses the question of the place of the Celestial Master in Daoist history. How does the Daoism of Edkins's present compare with that of other periods?

What has come now of the philosophy of Lau-kiün [老君] and Chwang Cheu [莊周]? It is much too abstruse for the modern Tauist mind. The Tauists of the present day do not occupy their attention with mysterious speculation on the pure and the true. Nor yet do they give attention to the alchemy of the Han dynasty. They have ceased to experiment on the elixir of life, or the transmutation of all metals into gold. Instead of this they occupy themselves with writing charms for driving demons out of houses, and with reading prayers for the removal of calamities. When you meet a Tauist of this generation, you do not meet with either an alchemist or a philosopher. The man you see claims, however, to be able to do very great things. He will undertake to drive a demon out of a madman, and from a haunted house, to cure the sick by magic, and to bring rain in time of drought by his prayers. He will protect by his charms the quiet citizen and the adventurous traveller from

all sorts of dangers; and, when there is mourning in the house, he will—like the Buddhist monk—hire out his services to read passages from the liturgies of his religion, which shall, by their magic power, quickly transfer the soul of the dead to the land of happiness on high.²⁴

²⁴ Edkins, *Chinese Buddhism*, pp.381–2.

In this short history we see the move from high philosophy to debased superstition that by now we have come to expect, but there is also another progression with a different force. Broadly speaking, in this passage Edkins draws a distinction between philosophy (Laozi and Zhuangzi) and the alchemy of the Han dynasty (implicitly, Zhang Daoling, the first Celestial Master) on the one side and exorcism and healing (the present Celestial Master) on the other. The pairing of philosophy and alchemy is important as the latter has been seen elsewhere as emblematic of Daoism in its fallen state. Here Edkins's distinction is rather between the elite and the popular, between a high and noble but essentially personal path and a practical calling to perform useful functions for the community, though of course one based on superstition and delusion. In this sense, characterising the Celestial Master as part of “popular” religion does not have all the negative associations that we might have expected.

Nevertheless, this characterisation of the Celestial Master as “popular” is a problem for Edkins because it does not tally with the evidence he presents about the man's obvious status. On the one hand, the services of the Celestial Master are available only to “the wealthy who can expend a thousand taels of silver without being pinched.” And on the other, his depiction of the place within the religion occupied by the Celestial Master argues forcefully against his being characterised as “popular.” His title, Edkins notes, is *zhenren*, which many contemporary students of Daoism would translate as “Realised Man.” In the view of the religion, he has “attained perfect power and virtue. He is the ideal man. Men under the domination of the passions are not called Chên-jên.” His ranking is “higher than sien, ‘immortal,’ but not so high as sheng, ‘holy.’” Zhang also assumes a state which mimics the imperial regime, with his retinue of officials, his ability to confer rank, and his privileged position in relation to the Jade Emperor in Heaven, addressing him memorials as his earthly representative. This is clearly an exalted position.

So Edkins presents the reader with a character that can be considered at once popular and exalted. The imperial trappings and the supposed mastery of the passions are clearly respected in some quarters—but for Edkins they must be defined as delusions. The healing, exorcism and granting of funerary rites are clearly to be abhorred by the modernising missionary—and yet the suffering population seeks them out for succour. In the end, however, Edkins's fundamental position on Daoism is made absolutely clear:

We see the effect of Buddhist and Tauist teaching in the present race of Chinese. The Tauist religion especially is responsible for those superstitions which have a dangerous character Every man, whether a Christian or not, ought on moral grounds, and on the greatest happiness principle itself,

²⁵ Ibid., p.395.

²⁶ On the history of the Daoist canon, see Liu Ts'un-yan, "The compilation and historical value of the Tao-tsang" in *Essays on the sources for Chinese history*, ed. D. Leslie, C. Mackerras, and Wang Gungwu (Canberra: ANU Press, 1973), and P. van der Loon, *Taoist books in the libraries of the Sung period: a critical study and index* (London: Ithaca Press, 1984), pp.29-63.

if he thinks that is a safer basis, to desire the extinction of a religious system which encourages dangerous and lying delusions Popular Taoism then is worthy of decided condemnation, from every Christian and every enlightened lover of mankind, whatever be his belief.²⁵

Appealing to the authority of utilitarian rationalism, "the greatest happiness principle itself," Edkins wishes for the eradication of religious systems such as Daoism. Study only produces informed condemnation. Yet his own scholarly labours reveal a fascination with Chinese religions and his level of understanding goes far beyond that required for those religions to be dismissed. In the specific case of the Celestial Master, what is remarkable is that Edkins does not acknowledge personal acquaintance; the distance he creates between himself and the Celestial Master in his writing appears to represent a particular way of responding to a figure and an institution that cannot quite be encompassed within the received narrative depictions of the degeneration and decline of the Daoist religion.

In some ways the realisation that the established models of the religions of the Chinese people were inadequate can simply be explained by a growing knowledge and understanding of what these religions actually were. In the specific case of Daoism, change came slowly and conceptions of the shape of the Daoist religion did not really alter until work on the Daoist canon itself became possible with its republication in 1923.²⁶ It was only then that close perusal of its textual heritage started to reveal the history of the religion. For scholars and observers, like Parker, Hart and Edkins, working some fifty years before the texts became available it would appear to have been the encounter with living Daoism that challenged their conceptions of what the religion was.

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