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A Brief Meditation on Daoist Prayer

Kratka meditacija o daoistični molitvi

Abstract: Prayer is a little-studied aspect of religious experience. This is especially true for a religion such as Daoism (Taoism), a Chinese religion widely known for its meditation practices and often confused with Buddhism. But, beyond meditation, Daoism had, from its beginnings as an organized religion in the second century C. E., prescribed methods of verbal communication with the higher powers, both in communal and private settings. This essay explores a few of these in hopes of prompting further investigation.

Keywords: Daoism, Vows, Buddhism, refuge, transgressions, commitment

Izleček: Molitev je malo raziskan vidik verskega izkustva. To še posebej velja za religije, kot je daoizem (taoizem), kitajska religija, ki je znana po svojih meditacijskih praksah in jo pogosto zamenjujejo z budizmom. Toda poleg meditacije je daoizem že od svojih začetkov kot organizirana religija v drugem stoletju pred našim štetjem predpisoval metode verbalnega sporazumevanja z višjimi silami tako v skupnem kot v zasebnem okolju. Ta esej obravnava nekaj teh metod v upanju, da bo spodbudil nadaljnje raziskave.

Ključne besede: daoizem, zaobljube, budizem, zatočišče, prestopki, zaveza(nost)

When people today think about Daoist methods of communion with the divine, the word that first comes to mind is »meditation«, not prayer. But, whether *apophatic* (consciousness-emptying), or *cataphatic* (consciousness-focusing), meditation centres on the awareness of the individual practitioner and not on the sort of discursive communication with higher powers we mean by prayer (Underwood 1987, 5816–5817). Daoists do indeed engage in practices that we would call »prayer«, but these have, perhaps surprisingly, not been the object of modern study. The strong association of Daoism with meditation techniques derives from Western fascination with the exotic, unfamiliar religious practices of South- and East Asia. Well-meaning or not, our Western over-emphasis on the strange and unfamiliar aspects of Daoist practice has had the effect of occluding our understanding of important aspects of the religion. It is perhaps best,

then, that I state at the outset that the ground we will cover in this essay will be new and may seem to contradict other accounts of Daoist practice.

1 Methodological considerations

This essay will not attempt to cover all of Daoism, the native Chinese religion with a historical existence that begins around the second century C.E. and continues to be strong in Chinese communities today. Instead, I will focus primarily on the foundational Daoist texts from the second to the sixth century. This is the period during which the religion took shape and developed many of its most distinctive practices.

I will not have much to say in this essay about meditation practices except where they have impact on the subject of prayer. Prayer, for my purposes here, is to be understood as a form of ritual action, marked by humanly constructed verbal communication with the unknown, most often conceived as divine or spiritual entities (Gill 1987, 7367; Baquedano-López 2024, 197). Thus considered, acts of prayer extend to a variety of discursive categories, including spells, incantations, songs, hymns, blessings, etc. As Tambiah (1968, 176) points out, the verbal forms employed by ritual, including the ritual of prayer, are varied even within a single utterance, so that prayer cannot be simply distinguished from spells as Frazier tried to do with »ritual« and »magic«.

Introducing the roles of prayer in the *Qu'rān*, Siddiqi and Kassam (2005, 8005) list a number of Arabic terms connoting prayer: »supplication (*du 'ā'*), remembrance (*dhikr*), repentance (*istighfār*), glorification (*tasbīh*), litany (*wird*), and ritual (*ṣalāt*)«. One could easily provide such a list drawn from Daoist scripture, but I will not attempt such a survey here. Rather, we shall focus on a few common terms and their place in individual and communal ritual practice. While they all designate practices that might be called prayer, these terms defy easy translation and, consequently, demonstrate linguistic features that distinguish them from the discourse of other religions. Explaining these terms, while a lengthy process, will hopefully highlight the distinctive features of Daoists relations with their gods.



Finally, while I shall of necessity make passing reference to what I perceive to be the understanding of prayer in the Mosaic traditions, this essay does not aim to be comparative. It will nonetheless of necessity be comparative in that I am writing in an Indo-European language about a discourse appearing in a Sino-Tibetan language. My task will often be to show how translations, including my own, do not adequately convey the semantic range or emotional impact of the original. The reader should further understand that, while I depend on the work of many other scholars, the conclusions and translation choices here are my own.

2 Modern translations

The common Chinese translations of the word »prayer« today are *qidao* 祈禱 or *daogao* 禱告. The word common to both of them, *dao* 禱, means 'to supplicate, implore, entreat' (Kroll 2022, 101). The former, *qidao*, means something like 'request and implore'. The latter, *daogao*, is most common in New Testament Chinese biblical translations and might be rendered both 'to pray for' and 'to make a request known'. The status connotations of both terms are similar – a lower status individual requests a person or being of higher status to fulfil some wish or favour. This suggests that the Chinese terms missionaries and their informants chose to translate concepts of »prayer« represent only a portion of the semantic terrain covered by our use of the word »prayer« in English language contexts as identified by Sam D. Gill and others. Gill writes that prayer includes »petition, invocation, thanksgiving (praise or adoration), dedication, supplication, intercession, confession, penitence, and benediction« (2005, 7367–7368). Semantically, *qidao* 祈禱 and *daogao* 禱告 most closely align with supplication and petitioning, but not the other uses of the English term listed by Gill.

Interestingly, in early Daoist texts these very terms are most often used pejoratively to criticize other religions' excessive practice. Take for instance the use of *dao* in a fifth-century Daoist scripture. Borrowing the tales of grisly postmortem sufferings (»hells«) brought to China with Buddhism, this scripture tells of the saviour deity, the Most High Lord of the Dao, visiting the earth-prisons and inquiring of the infernal overseers what these people had done to deserve such terrible punishment. He is told,



in one instance, that the inmates in one of the earth-prisons had, in their former lives

[t]aken life in countless sacrifices to provide offerings to shamans and the spirits of the dead. They laughed at Masters of the Dao and slandered the Perfected [Daoist] deities. [...] They let down their hair and, looking up into the heavens, called down gods in order to forcefully supplicate [*dao*] them. (DZ 455, 7a)

In other examples from Daoist scriptures, we find that such prayers [*qidao*] to »deviant entities« increase at the end of the world-age, that people improperly begging favours from the gods thereby earn the disapproval of the Dao, and read several more references to the improper taking of life in a vain attempt to pray to deviant spirits who are decidedly not the gods of the Dao. These deviant spirits subsist on the blood of offerings made to them, unlike Daoist gods who emanate from the Dao and subsist on pure *qi* [pneuma, breath] (Kleeman 1994, 190 ff.).

The pejorative use of the terms *qidao* 祈禱, *daogao* 禱告 and other linguistic variants began at least in the second century CE with the earliest Celestial Masters, who had injunctions against the practice of praying to unorthodox gods (Kleeman 2016, 93). The Daoist Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) even used the term *qidao* to criticize imperial sacrificial rituals which also involved vast expenditure and the slaughter of oxen and sheep to seek blessings from the gods. All, he wrote, »was extremely deluded« (*huo yi shen yi* 惑亦甚矣, DZ 1185, 14.7a).

Given both the history and the semantic narrowness of such terms, we might want to stop translating them uniformly as »prayer« in these early texts.

3 Early Daoist prayer – *yuan*

When we look for other analogues to »prayer«, both communal and individual, in Daoist writings the closest we will find is the term *yuan* 願. It is a difficult word to translate. In addition to 'prayer', scholars of Chinese



Buddhism regularly render the term ‘vow’, ‘aspiration’, ‘wish’, or even ‘to want’ (Charles Muller 2024). These scholars forward as evidence the Sanskrit words that early Chinese translated as *yuan*, a difficult enterprise since we rarely have access to early Buddhist source texts. And, since English is an Indo-European language, even when successful, the process of matching Sanskrit to English results in translations that seem reasonable but may not be. In fact, none of the translations above quite fit the early Daoist use of the term, as the following example illustrates.

Daoist practitioners regularly went into an oratory, either attached to their homes or in a central place of worship, to offer petitions to the deities. In one of the earliest accounts of this practice, upon entering the oratory, the practitioner would first make requests of the gods in each of the four directions, bowing and repeating the phrase »I *yuan* from [gods’ names] requesting ...« *Yuan cong ... qi ...* (願從...乞...; DZ 421, 3.10b). The items sought from the gods in these formulae were long life, health, freedom from disease, the descent of gods into the practitioner’s body, rescue of one’s family from death or sin, etc. The word *qi* ‘requesting’ introduces these, so *yuan* must mean something else.

Qi means more literally ‘to beg’, ‘to humbly request’. The status directionality of this term is our first clue that there is more to a *yuan*, whether used verbally or nominally, than a simple statement of one’s desire. Were we to translate simply »I want (*yuan*) to beg (*qi*) from gods X and Y«, we would risk missing the intricacies of the human/divine relationship that is portrayed in these texts.

In fact, the full name of the Celestial Master religion was the »Way of the Covenant with the Powers of the True One«. The True One was the Dao that pervades the cosmos with its vivifying *qi* and its powers were the deities who descended to enter into a strict covenant with practitioners. The covenant was binding to both the gods and the humans who entered into it. Humans vowed to abide by the precepts, to no longer sacrifice meat offerings to unorthodox gods, to confess their transgressions and vowed not to repeat them, and to uphold humane governance (Kleeman 2016, 68). In return, the gods strove to provide the sorts of protections listed above and to welcome the practitioner at death into the celestial bureaucracy.



Yuan, the fundamental meaning of which is »willing«, expresses the practitioner's willing entry into this contract with the gods, trading fealty and obedience to the moral codes for the benefits requested (Tao 2023, 273 ff.). I thus suggest understanding *yuan* to mean most closely 'commit' or 'commitment', though 'request' in some instances works well enough as a translation – so long as the reciprocal nature of the transaction is made clear (Bokenkamp 2004, 326 ff.).

4 Communal and Daoist prayer

As an example, the following *yuan* from a fifth century text, meant to be recited in ritual for the salvation of all beings, satisfies quite a few of the categories of prayer noticed by Siddiqi and Kassam – supplication, remembrance, repentance, glorification, ritual, and litany. It is meant to be repeated in communal worship, spoken once for each of the ten directions, the four cardinal directions, the intermediate points, up and down:

[We] now return our fates among the celestially honored ones of the limitless world systems of the east, the great saints who have achieved the Dao, the lords and elders of highest perfection, the Lords of the Nine Breaths, and all the officials of the eastern realms. Now we hold a retreat, burning incense and lighting lamps. We commit (*yuan*) the merit of this [act], illuminating all the heavens, on behalf of the lord and princes of the kingdom, the officials, the Ritual Masters who have achieved the Dao, my fathers, mothers and honored relatives, fellow students of the Dao, those worthies the Daoists who study perfection in seclusion in the mountains and forests, down to all living beings that fly, wriggle, crawl, and breathe, that they might all be saved from the ten bitternesses and eight difficulties, that they might eternally reside in inaction and receive what is so of itself [= the Dao]. (Bokenkamp, 2004, 327)

今皈命東方无極太上靈寶天尊，已得道大聖眾，至真諸君丈人，九氣天君，東鄉諸靈官：今故立齋，燒香然燈，願以是功德照曜諸天，普為帝王國主君官吏民，受道法師，父母尊親，同學門人，隱居山林學真道士，諸賢者，蠹飛蠕動蚊行蛭息一切眾生，普得免度十苦八難，長居無為普度自然 (DZ 1400, 1.17b–18a)



This formula indicates clearly that the practitioners are distributing the merit of their worshipful actions to save others. While they are not able to perform the act of salvation themselves, the practitioners are made to feel responsible for initiating it and can act on behalf of certain others. That is to say, by virtue of their practice, they have the power to distribute the merit of their acts to designated recipients. The ten bitternesses from which they seek to rescue living beings are sufferings in the earth-prisons, the hells or actually »purgatories«. Brought along with concepts of transmigration by Buddhism, these postmortem places of suffering came to disrupt traditional Chinese ancestral practice. The eight difficulties are unfortunate rebirths (Bokenkamp 2007).

While practitioners can tap into the centre of power, the Dao, only cosmic deities might effect such widespread acts of mercy. And Daoist scriptures provide direct access to the highest gods of the pantheon. A common example comes from a late fourth century scripture that gives the festival days. These are times when the gods gather in celestial palaces to check the records of humans and to ensure the orderly functioning of the universe. On these days, humans are to

burn incense and practice the Dao, holding retreats and keeping in mind their *yuan*, not transgressing the statutes and prohibitions. If they do so, then the Directors of Destinies will record their names in the records of life and order the chthonian authorities to rally and protect them. [...] Those who violate the statutes and prohibitions will have their names erased from the books of life and transmitted to the demon officers.

燒香行道，齋戒願念，不犯科禁則司命勒名生錄，勅地祇營護...違科犯禁削除生籍，移名鬼官。(DZ 22, 3.4a)

As these promises make clear, Daoism is a practice based religion, rather than one centred around faith. We should not draw this distinction too starkly, however, since while Daoism does not require that one swear fealty to a specific creed or set of beliefs, practitioners are enjoined to cultivate mental states that include non-contention, calm, selflessness, compassion, and the like.



In one early fifth century Daoist text, for example, practitioners are told to memorize a set of cues, common sights that call into their minds appropriate *yuan*. For instance, when they see a Daoist temple they should commit to bringing all within the ten directions to see the Dao; when they see a poor person, they should commit to making all magnanimous; when they see a beautiful girl, to causing all to chastely follow the precepts; when viewing white snow, to bring it about that all live in purity and freedom, etc. (DZ 344, 4b–7a). In these cases, *yuan* might indeed be translated ‘vow’, although, again, the underlying transaction imagined is not that the practitioners will vow to accomplish the transformation of others by themselves, but that their practice of the Dao will result in these favourable outcomes through actions of the gods. This differentiates the Daoist version from the Buddhist formulae that inspired it (Bokenkamp 1983, 470). Thus, the Daoist god who utters these commemorations ends with the statement that Daoists, whether awake or asleep, should constantly commit (*yuan*) to joining with the spirits as one for the salvation of all beings in the ten directions. The daily commemorations facilitate this (DZ 344, 7b).

6 Private Daoist prayer

But what about personal prayer? Was there room for that in Daoism? Daoist ritual manuals contain memorials to the gods requesting their aid in all sorts of emergencies, including locust infestation, disease, flood, drought, and warfare. These are formulae, though, and often expressed in general terms so that Daoist priests could use them in a number of circumstances.

There is, however, evidence that the pantheon of Daoism also provided more personable and accessible deities to whom one might also appeal. These intermediary gods had more direct access to the powers of the Dao and would hear individual prayer. Descriptions of what was to occur in the oratory make place for these »verbal requests« (*kouqi* 口乞) to be uttered in one’s own words after the completion of the scripted presentations. This was likely the closest analogue to personal prayer, but its oral nature means that we have no surviving examples, only places in the oratory ritual scripts where the *kouqi* were allowed. It is hard to imagine, though, that such prayers would have differed radically from the *yuan*. It is likely that the practitioner would very humbly remind the deities of his/her fealty,



state the problem that needed to be addressed, rehearse the deities' powers, and then offer further worship in exchange for their help.

The following petition expresses well this contractual relationship. This is perhaps the only individual petition, as opposed to ritually scripted *yuan* like those we have so far discussed, to have survived. In this case, the twenty-two year old Xu Hui 許翮 (341–ca. 370) confesses his sins and humbly offers himself to save his sick father and elder brother, hoping that the goddess will accept his loyalty, approve his confession and other ritual actions, and interact on their behalf.

The numinous Way is exalted and void. This fleshly being (=I) have not yet attained its Perfected doctrines, but can only control their hearts, maintain reverence, and practice its precious secrets. Sometimes I fear that, its numinous instructions being lofty and distant, its instructions subtle, I in my obstinate ignorance will never be able to become enlightened. Transgressions such as these, accumulating over the months and days, violate the doctrines and precepts and must by now number in the thousands and tens of thousands.

The divine mother [the goddess, Wei Huacun,] is a humane protectress and always willing to pardon. Thus today, with intense apprehension, my inner organs churning, I search within and contemplate my transgressions. There is no repairing the faults of the past. Were I to lay them all before you, they would be extremely numerous, and I hope you will allow that this is not the occasion to do that.

At the same time, with fear and trembling, I, Yufu, with full sincerity beg to make the following oath: From today, I will make a new start. Cleansing my heart, with sincerity I make a covenant with heaven and earth. Preserving my body in stillness, I obediently receive instructions and reprimands. I beg the commitment (*qi yuan*) absolving my father Mu [Xu Mi] and elder brother Huya [Xu Lian] of interrogation for crimes great and small. Though I am of no account, I beg that I personally receive the punishment, so that you can (*yuan*) absolve and amnesty [all of their] great



and small [crimes]. In accord with receiving the compassion of the Divine Mother, I Xu Yufu, contemplate my faults and seek to repair my transgressions that my entire family might receive the benefits, live long in the sublunary world and receive long life and rebirth. Respectfully submitted.(Bokenkamp 2007, 147)

男生許玉斧辭。玉斧以尸濁肉人。受聖愍濟拔。每賜敕誠。實恩隆子孫。常仰銜靈澤。永賴天廕。玉斧以驚鈍頑下。質性難訓。雖夙夜自厲。患於愆失。此夕夢悟。尋思此意。皆玉斧罪責。慙懼屏營。無地自厝。靈道高虛。肉人未達真法。唯執心守敬。脩行寶祕而已。或恐靈旨高遠。誠喻幾微。玉斧頑闇。不能該悟。如此之罪。日月臻積。違法犯誠。亦當千萬。神母仁宥。輒復原赦。故今日憂惶深重。肝膽破碎。唯折骨思愆。無補往過。連陳啓煩多。希請非所。兼以愧怖。玉斧歸誠乞誓。以今日更始。當洗濯心誠。盟於天地。靜守形骸。軌承訓誨。乞願父穆兄虎牙小大罪考。玉斧不修。乞身自受責。原赦大小。若神母遂見哀愍。許玉斧思愆補過。舉家端等受恩。是永覩三光。受命更生。謹辭 (7.12b–13a)

Xu Hui opens by humbly stating his inability to fully apprehend the Dao. The extreme humility of this statement should not blind us to the fact that he is reminding the powers of the Dao of two things. First, that he is yet human and, second, most importantly, that he practices the Dao and strives toward enlightenment. In other words, the opening serves to restate the terms of his relationship with the Dao as a Daoist practitioner.

Next, Xu Hui, again with almost painful humility, names the deity to whom he will appeal. We are fortunate to have an early commentator who has identified the »Divine Mother« as Wei Huacun 魏華存 (fl. 320), who in life had been a Daoist official and leader. At the time of this petition, she was a goddess who served as Director of Destinies for the Higher Perfected. That is to say, she had entered the Daoist pantheon and had achieved a rank of power in the unseen bureaucracy. She was not Xu Hui's mother or relative. He addresses her in this intimate manner in hopes of eliciting her compassion.

Given this, Xu Hui's statement that his transgressions are so many that he deserves no consideration from the Director of Destinies is somewhat disingenuous. The goddess Wei Huacun was the divine preceptor of Xu



Hui's human Daoist master (Bokenkamp 2021, 9–10). Therefore, Xu Hui can merely allude to his flaws and end »I hope you will allow that this is not the occasion« to rehearse all of them. In this oblique fashion, he reminds the Director of his knowledge of the rules – when and where it is proper to confess – and relies on their special relationship.

Finally, *yuan* is used here in two different phrases, both very difficult to render into English, but the reciprocal nature of the transaction Xu Hui proposes to his goddess is very clear. He is willing to sacrifice himself for his father and elder brother, both in the present world and the next where they would otherwise appear before infernal judges. This is a highly moral act, expressing at the same time the highest Daoist morality and traditional Chinese filiality. And, given his repeated reminders of his Daoist practice, Xu Hui could be fairly certain that he would not be in fact punished for the sins of his family members. In the end, it seems, the goddess refused Xu Hui offer to act as a scapegoat but did help to spare the ill family members (Bokenkamp 2007, 148).

Final thoughts

The Daoist Song Wenming 宋文明 (fl. 550) notes that the first Daoist canon was divided into twelve generic categories. The last two of these were 11) hymns of praise and 12) memorials and petitions (Ōfuchi 1975, 35). Both categories contain countless pieces that we might consider »prayer«. To present them all would require, I believe, at least sixty thick volumes. There is simply too much that requires explanation.

The few examples we have surveyed in some detail all fit into the twelfth category, memorials and petitions. They serve to demonstrate, I hope, the importance of one aspect of Daoist prayer that seems central to me: the role of *yuan* »commitment« as a statement of mutual responsibility in Daoist communications with the deities. Daoism centres around the oft-reiterated, multi-part covenant drawn between the Dao and humanity (Tao 2023). This covenant is constructed to remind humans that they are coextensive with the Dao, which flows through them as well as through all existence, connecting the human with the cosmos. When things go wrong



with the system, when violence, illness, or disaster threaten, then, Daoism teaches its practitioners to look within the self for sources of disorder.

Xu Hui's memorial, a rare survival for this early period, exemplifies this. As a junior member of the family, his Daoist practice provides him warrant to take for the moment a leading role in confronting a threat to his family. This might seem as a sense of entitlement. In fact, his self-searching and recognition of his role in the greater community of the Dao are both part of the process that will allow him to work toward restoration of good order. His commitment arises, we noticed, from his feeling of inclusion, his fellowship with a divine being. As a practitioner and part of the healing systems of the Dao, he has a role to play. In doing so, he prompts the deity, though she refuses his particular solution, to bring healing to the family.

The same sense of unity is more grandly expressed in the communal retreat ritual *yuan* with which we began section four. I have translated the term *guiming* 歸命 as literally as possible – »return our fates« – rather than the standard translations used for Buddhist texts, »to devote one's life; to take refuge« (Patton 2024). It will seem odd in English, but helps, I think, to remind readers of what is clear in the rest of the passage. Emanating from the Dao, humans can »return« to it by engaging in proscribed practices of harmony. Such human practitioners are part of a greater practice of the Dao that is going on simultaneously in the highest heavens. In performing the practice, they bring their destinies back home, to the Dao, returning to be among the highest gods circling the palaces of the heavens where the original, true forms of the scriptures are stored. The practice does not seek to only look up, but down as well, reminding us humans that we are joined not just with the »the celestially honoured ones of the limitless world systems«, but also with »all living beings that fly, wriggle, crawl, and breathe«. To return to the primal state of harmony, we must bring our world with us.



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| <p>22 <i>Yuanshi wulao chishu yupian</i>
<i>zhenwen tianshu jing</i> 元始五老赤書玉
篇真文天書經»</p> <p>344 <i>Taishang dongxuan lingbao zhihui</i>
<i>benyuan dajie shangpin jing</i> 太上洞玄
靈寶智慧本願
大戒上品經</p> | <p>421 Dengzhen yinjue 登真隱訣</p> <p>442 <i>Shangqing housheng jun lieji</i> 上清後聖
道君列紀</p> <p>1016 Zhen'gao 真誥</p> <p>1185 抱朴子內篇</p> <p>1400 洞玄靈寶長夜之府九幽玉匱明真科</p> |
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