

Heavenly Masters: Two Thousand Years of the Daoist State. By Vincent Goossaert. New Daoist Studies Series. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2021. Pp. x + 416. \$68.00 hardcover.

In the present day, the title “Heavenly Master” or “Celestial Master,” in Chinese *tianshi* 天師, evokes diverse associations. While many people associate this title with a demon-catching exorcist or miracle-worker, a popular image still nurtured by contemporary movies and other media, only those more familiar with Chinese religion or culture in general will relate it to the founder of organized Daoism or the head of a powerful Daoist institution. In his new book, *Heavenly Masters*, Vincent Goossaert, for the first time in any Western language, provides a full history and analysis of the Heavenly Master institution based at Longhu Shan 龍虎山 (Dragon and Tiger Mountain) in today’s Jiangxi province.

Making use of a wide range of primary sources and secondary research, this remarkably comprehensive study paints a picture of the institution’s long-term continuity, corroborating the author’s vision of a “Daoist state.” Many earlier works by Goossaert focused, however not exclusively, on the Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) tradition, which he termed “the visible face of Taoism”¹ since the Qing dynasty. In the present book, by contrast, Goossaert exclusively studies the central institution of the Tianshi Dao 天師道 (Way of the Heavenly Masters) or Zhengyi 正一 (Orthodox Unity) tradition, and he devoted this work to the memory of his teacher Kristofer M. Schipper (1934–2021), who was not only a leading and visionary scholar in the field of Daoist studies but also an ordained Zhengyi Daoist.

The book is divided into nine chapters of varying length and density. Like the development of Longhu Shan and the Heavenly Master institution itself, the scholarly narrative of this study is complex and multifaceted, making it a rather demanding read, yet retaining a common thread and rigorous analysis throughout.

In the “Introduction” (pp. 1–11), Goossaert argues that the Heavenly Master institution at Longhu Shan, which was known as the most important centre of Daoist ordination and orthodoxy until the end of imperial China, “can be historically ascertained only beginning with the ninth century” (p. 2), although the Zhang family operating it claimed descent from Zhang Daoling 張道陵, the first Heavenly Master who reportedly founded an early Daoist community in the area of today’s Sichuan province during the second century C.E. He thus makes a clear difference between

¹ Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), p. 38.

the early “Heavenly Master church”² and the “Heavenly Master institution,” which came into being only after the “church” had dissolved, but he also observes a fundamental continuity between the two: “the Heavenly Master institution brought the Daoist bureaucracy invented in the Heavenly Master church one step further by building it up on earth” (p. 4). However, according to Goossaert, the alleged descent from Zhang Daoling is by no means a historical fact: “One of the many Zhang families that claimed descent and organized a local cult to him, located at Longhushan, eventually managed to reshape the Zhang Daoling myth to their exclusive advantage” (p. 9).

Another important point made by Goossaert is that although the present book introduces a central Daoist institution managed by the Tianshi Dao or Zhengyi tradition, it is not to be understood as dealing with a distinct lineage, school, or “sect” of Daoism. In his words: “My book is not the history of one specific Daoist school among others but of Daoism as a whole, through its most important, encompassing institution” (p. 7).

In Chapter One, “Inventing the Founding Ancestor: The Lives of Zhang Daoling” (pp. 13–32), the author explains that he views Zhang Daoling, the first Heavenly Master by tradition, as a “divine persona” rather than a historical person. While most of what we know about Zhang Daoling certainly evolved from various legends, I would still hold that the early Heavenly Master “church,” which originated in today’s Sichuan, had a historical leader. So why not call him Zhang Daoling? By contrast, Zhang Lu 張魯, the third Heavenly Master who built up a theocratic state in the area of Hanzhong 漢中, is accepted as a historical figure by most scholars. Since the Hanzhong theocracy obviously inherited an older tradition based in western Sichuan, I doubt that the latter’s leader is a mere invention by later hagiographers. However, the link between Zhang Daoling and Longhu Shan is definitely the product of religious myth-building:

The Longhushan institution inherited a Zhang Daoling who was already an exorcist, a demon fighter, together with an alchemist-turned-immortal, and a church builder; what it really brought to his myth is one story, anchoring the myth at Longhushan, and one idea: that Zhang Daoling created a hereditary patriarchy. (p. 32)

Chapter Two, “The Rise of Longhushan” (pp. 33–52), discloses how Longhu Shan became an “easily accessible” (p. 49) sacred site and ordination centre that was

² The most comprehensive study of the early Heavenly Master “church” in a Western language is Terry F. Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).

included in Daoist holy geography as a “blessed land” (*fudi* 福地) after 750 and received state support by the tenth century. It is clear “that hagiographies of Zhang Daoling and his descendants were rewritten to include Longhushan” (p. 40), where a thriving cult of the first Heavenly Master was successfully established. “Most plausibly, by about the mid-Tang, a Zhang family at Longhushan (with or without any actual blood link to Zhang Lu; this is not provable one way or the other) started to claim descent and gradually acquired legitimacy” (p. 43). This involved the fabrication of a patriarchal line, a concept which evolved in the early eighth century within the Chan Buddhist tradition and was adopted by Daoism, which means that a fair number of Heavenly Masters, the fourth to about the seventeenth in particular, are later inventions.

Chapter Three, “The Heavenly Masters in the History of Daoist Ordinations” (pp. 53–89), turns to the Heavenly Master tradition’s unique form of ordination: the conferment of “registers” (*lu* 籙), which allowed access to ascending levels in a spiritual (or priestly) hierarchy as well as divine protection. “This structure of ordinations, including laypeople and priests at different levels, was part of the Tianshidao from the start, and continued down to the present day to be at the core of the organization of Daoism” (p. 57). To be sure, these ordinations were not invented by the Heavenly Master institution; they only underwent further development and codification to be finally monopolized by the Zhangs of Longhu Shan. They invented a “register of the merit inspector” (*dugong lu* 都功籙), which could be conferred on any adept deemed worthy and was modelled on (and thus replaced) the office of “merit inspector of Yangping Parish” (*Yangping zhi dugong* 陽平治都功) in the old Heavenly Master church. Since only the descendants of Zhang Daoling could fill the office of “merit inspector” of the central Yangping Parish, the Longhu Shan Zhangs then imposed the idea that only they could grant this ordination and that this register was an indispensable precondition for becoming a proper Daoist priest. The foundations of the Longhu Shan institution’s monopoly on Daoist ordinations were thus laid.

During the Song dynasty, under Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126) in particular, three ordination centres enjoying monopolistic rights emerged: Longhu Shan (Zhengyi ordinations), Gezao Shan 閣皂山 (Lingbao 靈寶 ordinations), and Maoshan 茅山 (Shangqing 上清 ordinations); the latter two, however, would be surpassed in influence by Longhu Shan in the mid-thirteenth century. From the Song times onward, Daoist adepts would receive their ordination at one of the three centres, whereas initiation into concrete ritual methods (*fa* 法) and the bestowal of divine official titles was the responsibility of personal masters in their home regions.

Chapter Four, “New Rituals and the Longhushan Synthesis of Modern Daoism” (pp. 91–128), discusses Longhu Shan’s further expansion as a centre of universal Daoist ordination. According to Goossaert, new ritual traditions (*fa* or *daofa* 道法), which developed or became popular in the Song dynasty and were often linked to the milieu of so-called vernacular ritual masters (*fashi* 法師), played a major role in this

process. Since many *fashi* viewed Zhang Daoling as the founder of their traditions, they turned to Longhu Shan for ordination by receiving Zhengyi registers, whereupon the Heavenly Master institution codified numerous *daofa* and became a training centre for these ritual traditions. In Goossaert's words:

[T]he *daofa* adepts contributed to the rise of Longhushan by patronizing its Zhengyi-level ordinations; and, in a second phase, Longhushan in turn adopted and came to control and shape the *daofa*, further expanding its China-wide networks and power base. (p. 113)

A key figure in this process was Zhang Jixian 張繼先 (1092–1126), the thirtieth Heavenly Master, who was credited as the founder of many *daofa*. Although he died young, Zhang Jixian was a charismatic leader who left a rich religious and literary heritage. Interestingly, he was closely associated with Qingcheng Shan 青城山 in Sichuan, where his supposed ancestor Zhang Daoling had reportedly subdued demons in former times. Zhang Jixian also wrote poems on eleven of the original twenty-four parishes 二十四治 of the early Heavenly Master church. Did Zhang Jixian ever travel to Sichuan or was he only reconnected to the birthplace of the early church by means of pious myths?

At least in theory, the ritual methods (*fa*) practised by a Daoist adept should be in accordance with the register (*lu*) and rank that he / she received through ordination. The “institutional framework” to place all *daofa* in a hierarchical scheme emerged in the form of an openly circulated normative text, the *Tiantan yuge* 天壇玉格, which is studied by Goossaert in detail (pp. 115–28). In the early Ming, the *Tiantan yuge* gained authoritative status and was later included in the *Daofa huiyuan* 道法會元 and other canonical collections.

Chapter Five, “The Mature Institution: Longhushan during the Song-Yuan Period” (pp. 129–56), shows how the Heavenly Master institution “developed during the Song a full institutional apparatus that allowed it to deploy a bureaucratic management of Daoism throughout the empire and to implement its project of licensing and regulating all the living and the dead” (p. 129). This was based on the invention of a patriarchal line, the development of Longhu Shan as a sacred site, and the organization of mass ordinations. Longhu Shan also developed its own master-disciple lineages, which would become the dominant model of religious organization in both Buddhism and Daoism by the early Ming. These Zhengyi lineages began to take shape during the tenure of the thirtieth Heavenly Master and were connected to the residences or “colleges” (*yuan* 院 or *daoyuan* 道院) clustered around the Shangqing Gong 上清宮 temple on Longhu Shan. Many priests who were trained at the residences would eventually belong to the China-wide network of “elite Daoists,” and some of them also had access to the court and literati circles.

During the Song dynasty, Longhu Shan was granted state recognition, which was a gradual process involving several Heavenly Masters. Finally, in the mid-thirteenth century, Longhu Shan held the empire-wide monopoly on Daoist ordinations. However, it was the relatively liberal religious policy of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, especially the early Yuan when the Quanzhen tradition was also thriving, that consolidated Longhu Shan's position as an institution controlling not only ordinations, but also large parts of the Daoist clergy.

Chapter Six, "The Most Powerful Heavenly Master Ever? The Lives of Zhang Yuchu" (pp. 157–83), relates the story of the forty-third Heavenly Master who was well known for his scholarly lifestyle and "has been a favorite of those who like Daoism so far as it seems Confucian" (p. 159). Zhang Yuchu 張宇初 (1361–1410), building on his father's early allegiance to Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, the Hongwu Emperor 洪武帝 of the Ming (r. 1368–1398), established "the close alliance between the Heavenly Master institution and the Ming dynasty that allowed for the greatest development of that institution ever" (p. 157). He was, thus, able to maintain the high degree of autonomy that Longhu Shan had enjoyed since the Yuan dynasty. Zhang Yuchu was not only the head of an empire-wide ordination system but also a sophisticated author, compiler, painter, and calligrapher. He left numerous writings, including a complete literary anthology, and was entrusted with the compilation of the *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏. In his essay *Daomen shigui* 道門十規 (DZ1232), Zhang Yuchu embraced a universal and inclusive vision of Daoism, showing "how artificial an opposition between Zhengyi and Quanzhen is in the context of the early Ming, and more generally in late imperial times" (p. 177).

At the beginning of Chapter Seven, "The Institution under the Ming and the Qing" (pp. 185–217), Goossaert states: "When Zhang Yuchu passed away, all the key elements of the Heavenly Master institution's relation to the state for the next five centuries were in place" (p. 185). Although the Heavenly Masters' privileges during the Qing, especially from the Qianlong 乾隆 reign (r. 1736–1796) onward, paled in comparison with earlier dynasties, the author stresses continuity in the institution's status that lasted until the end of imperial China. Therefore, he treats the Ming and Qing dynasties as one historical period, which is also often the case in studies written by Chinese scholars.

The Heavenly Master was still a charismatic figure in late imperial China; his travels through the country attracted great attention and were also reported by Western missionaries living in China. The Heavenly Master was always accompanied by several *faguan* 法官, elite Daoists who held official positions and were experts in liturgy. During the late Qing, there were still twenty-six *faguan* positions at Longhu Shan (p. 197). Since the Heavenly Master was staying at his residence on Longhu Shan far away from the capital, relations between the court and Longhu Shan (and Daoism in general) were maintained by "imperial chaplains" (p. 198) like the Longhu

Shan Daoists Shi Daoyuan 施道淵 (1616–1678) under the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor (r. 1662–1722) and Lou Jinyuan 婁近垣 (1689–1776) under the Yongzheng 雍正 (r. 1723–1735) and Qianlong Emperors. While the Heavenly Master institution had no direct administrative control over temples, which was the task of the state-run Daolusi 道錄司, Longhu Shan maintained close contacts with major temples and clerics, especially in Jiangxi and the Jiangnan 江南 region.

As to the economic model of the Heavenly Master institution (pp. 214–17), it functioned as a corporate body comprising the Zhang lineage, the Heavenly Master's residence (*Zhenren fu* 真人府), and the Shangqing Gong. The main types of income of these corporate constituents were donations from the court, rent from landed estates, and fees for ritual services and ordinations. Larger endowments, e.g., land donations from the court, committed Longhu Shan to providing extensive ritual services.³ However, Longhu Shan had built up a remarkably stable and well-connected institution, and that is why “a large part of its income and support base was independent of the ups and downs in imperial favor” (p. 217).

In Chapter Eight, “The Heavenly Masters and Late Imperial Chinese Society” (pp. 219–63), the author expounds his vision of the Longhu Shan institution as a “religious state,” providing a detailed analysis of its constituents: “military force” (exorcism and talismans), “civil service” (ordination and licensing), “canonizations” (investiture of local deities), “justice” (judicial rituals), and “taxation” (of priests and temple communities).

“Ever since the Yuan dynasty, the Daoist clergy was officially and practically divided into two orders: the monastic, ascetic Quanzhen (with its own entirely separate ordination procedures, *chuanjie* 傳戒, based in large monasteries) and the Zhengyi” (p. 222). Longhu Shan was in charge of the latter, holding the exclusive right to confer ordination registers until 1911. Of course, not every Zhengyi Daoist travelled to Longhu Shan to receive registers there. Most adepts were ordained by their local masters, “while being physically or notionally transmitted a register that had been received earlier on in their lineage” (p. 223).

Another realm of the Heavenly Master institution's bureaucratic activities was the canonization of local gods who were, like the Daoists the Heavenly Masters ordained, managed along the civil service nine-rank ladder 九品階. Daoist canonization and state canonization of deities worked parallel and were in some cases enmeshed.

While local Daoists were liable to pay dues to the Heavenly Master, which normally happened during the latter's travels, communities would often participate

³ On the workings of religious endowments in traditional China, see Volker Olles, “Merit and Virtue—Buddhist and Daoist Foundations in China (500–1500 C.E.),” *Endowment Studies* 3 (2019): 36–52.

in a symbolic taxation system managed by the City God Temples. Thus, “the early church ideal of universal ordination, registration, and salvation was adapted by the Heavenly Master institution; the population was now registered through their local temple community” (p. 259). Based on the above-mentioned characteristics, Goossaert defines the Longhu Shan institution as a “religious state” belonging to the same cultural paradigm as the imperial state.

Chapter Nine, “The Predicaments of Modernity: The Heavenly Masters since the 1850s” (pp. 265–87), is a history of decline. In the 1850s and 1860s, Longhu Shan suffered severe destruction during the Taiping Rebellion. It was, however, rebuilt and was still an impressive mansion (and a functioning institution), when Christian missionaries and other foreigners occasionally visited it. A Catholic church was built on Longhu Shan in 1872, and the relationship between the Heavenly Masters and Christian missionaries was friendly.

Zhang Yuanxu 張元旭 (1862–1925) was the last Heavenly Master nominated by the emperor during the final decades of imperial China. Faced with the contemporary anti-superstition discourse, Zhang Yuanxu was soon heavily attacked by the progressive press and intellectuals during the Republican era, when he was also stripped of his former privileges. Nevertheless, staying in Shanghai, he participated in a lively interreligious dialogue and tried to set up a nationwide Daoist Association. Yet his participation in the failed imperial restoration of Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916) in 1915–1916, as well as his engagement with redemptive societies and warlords, finally worked against him. His eldest son, Zhang Enpu 張恩溥 (1904–1969), who had succeeded him as the sixty-third Heavenly Master in 1925, had to flee to Taiwan after the communist takeover in 1949. This was the end of the traditional Heavenly Master institution at Longhu Shan. Although revived as a Daoist sanctuary and ordination centre now, Longhu Shan is not the seat of a Heavenly Master any more and has irrecoverably lost its former grandeur and independence.

In his “Conclusion” (pp. 289–97), Goossaert reasserts the *longue durée* continuity between the early Heavenly Master church and the Longhu Shan institution:

From the earliest sources on the Tianshidao, Zhang Daoling, and all the ordained members of the church, by delegation from him, are described as putting the world back in order and opening a path to salvation for all humans by identifying and separating what is correct (正) from what is devious (邪). Yet the very same aim and distinguishing exercise has been at the core of the Heavenly Master institution from its earliest days in the ninth century: the Heavenly Master[s] and their staffs have worked for over eleven centuries as a licensing agency for local traditions (the *fā*), priests (through ordinations), and gods and their territorial communities, certifying to the state and society at large their status as moral, correct, and registered with Heavenly authorities. (p. 289)

Being “the operating center of the Daoist bureaucracy that the early Heavenly Master church had invented” (p. 290), the Longhu Shan institution continued to transmit the charismatic powers of Zhang Daoling, whose patriarchal succession they claimed, granting legitimacy and salvation to Daoist adepts. Thus, it worked as a “deep state” in traditional China.

Heavenly Masters should be on the reading list of anyone interested in Chinese religion and history. The book’s layout and binding match the high quality of its contents. Two appendices (“List of the Heavenly Masters” and “The Different Versions of the *Tiantan yuge*”), notes, bibliography, and an index make it a useful research tool. The dust jacket shows a traditional portrait of Zhang Daoling, indicating the first Heavenly Master’s enduring significance. While the hereditary office of the Heavenly Master and the independent Longhu Shan institution have certainly ceased to exist in contemporary China, the lore of Zhang Daoling and his Daoist achievements in the mountains of Sichuan is still very much alive and continues to inform the faith and practice of Daoism today.

DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202301_(76).0007

VOLKER OLLES
Sichuan University