Introduction

Guo Ruoxu 郭若虚 (ca. 1041–98), the most influential art critic of eleventh-century China, closes his painting treatise Experiences in Painting (Tuhua jianwenzhi 圖畫見聞誌) by differentiating his painting records from the “magical paintings” (shuhua 術畫) of Daoists:

At the beginning of [the present] dynasty there was a Daoist adept, Lu Xizhen, whose every painting of a flower on a wall would attract bees. Even though [such masters as] Bian [Luan], Huang [Quan], Xu [Xi], and Zhao [Chang] wielded their brushes, one may be sure that there was no such manifestation as a coming of bees. Aren’t such people [who paint a flower on a wall to attract swarming bees] the same as those who gain merit by bewildering people, and find fame by confusing the practice of art? As for rustics climbing a wall and beautiful women dropping from a parapet, the dazzle of the five colors in the midst of water and the ascent of twin dragons beyond the mists—all are the products of sorcery, fantastic lies without any relation to the laws of painting. None such, in consequence, is recorded here.

Guo admits clearly that he eschewed the recording of “magical paintings” because they did not compare to the standard “artistic paintings” (yihua 藝畫) of his time. From his point of view, they did not exhibit any recognized style or technique and were ill-suited to art history proper. From the perspective of reception, too, such images did not stimulate cultivated intellectual responses. Instead, they exerted supernatural power over the environment and activated ritual performance.

Although Guo’s magical paintings are not necessarily Daoist, they nevertheless relate to a vast pool of images—mostly by anonymous artists—in Daoist visual
culture. Here magical power, more than style and execution, and certainly much more than standard convention, is a core concern both at the time of creation and when used in ritual performance. For many centuries Guo’s evaluation has exerted a serious impact on the history of Chinese art, so that Daoist stories and images have gone unrecorded and unstudied.

This book remedies this situation. It investigates the visual culture of religious Daoism, China’s primary indigenous religion, focusing on the period from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries with many references to both earlier and later times. Paintings, drawings, printed illustrations, diagrams, charts, maps, talismans, and magical scripts—all essential and unique to the Daoist experience—form its key sources. It places these various kinds of visual forms in the changing context of Daoist history, culture, and ritual, creating holistic perspectives of the visuality, materiality, meaning, and function of Daoist art.

Visual Dimensions

Daoist art as an academic field is still in its infancy, and many sources remain unexplored. Stephen Little, a pioneer in the field, attributes this to the relatively small number of surviving artworks clearly identified as Daoist, as opposed to the ample number of Buddhist images in East Asia. Anna Seidel links the paucity of Daoist objects to their ephemerality and use in ritual: many scroll paintings, paper sculptures, and ritual objects were burnt or buried when symbolically transferred to the supernatural world. Moreover, as Judith Boltz and other scholars observe, Daoist primary texts treating religious and ritual practices are often arcane and “chaotically abundant,” thus tending to limit scholarly access to them.

When approaching Daoist art, scholars acknowledge that icon making is a “soft area” in Daoism, so they tend to draw on research models for iconography, iconology, and formal analysis that are associated with well-established, mainstream Buddhist art scholarship. The study of Daoist icons also mirrors major concerns raised in the study of Buddhist art. What pantheon is depicted in the painting or statue? What religious scripture, doctrine, or belief does the image reflect? What are the stylistic characteristics of the object? Who are the maker, patron, and intended audience? These and similar questions are in line with questions raised in mainstream studies of religion, art, and visual culture even beyond Asia. The limitations of these valid questions become apparent when applied to the study of Daoist images.

Most Daoist images examined on the basis of the Buddhist-inspired research model are iconic, figurative, and representational images of deities and immortals, material-
ized in portable paintings, temple murals, sculptures, and stone steles. An intriguing object that best problematizes this approach is the sixth-century stone stele (dated 527) featuring two deities that look alike (fig. 0.1). The northern Chinese female Daoist officiant Wang A’shan 王阿善 commissioned it on behalf of her husband, Feng A’biao 馮阿檦, and her son, Feng Yixian 馮義顯, both deceased. Based on the stele’s small size and single donor, Stanley Abe suggested that it may be a “private object more appropriate to individual devotion.”

The pairing of two deities in almost identical fashion is inspired by the Buddhist iconography of the Two Seated Buddhas (Erfo bingzuo 二佛並坐)—a standard paired iconography of the buddhas Sakyamuni and Prabhūtaratna (Duobao fo 多寶佛) popular in the fifth and sixth centuries and derived from the scenario described in the Lotus Sutra (Miaofa lianhua jing 妙法蓮華經). Previously scholars had debated the problematic identities of the twin deities featured in the 527 stele. Arthur

Fig. 0.1. Stele with twin Daoist deities. Northern Wei dynasty, dated 527. Sandstone. 27.8 × 27.5 cm.
Pontynen reads them as the dual presences of Laozi—the incarnate and the divine.\textsuperscript{17} Anna Seidel identifies the two seated icons as the Perfected Ones of the Left and Right found in early medieval Daoist texts.\textsuperscript{18} The stele bears a controversial inscription on the left, identifying the figure on the left as the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang 玉皇). Stephen Little accepts the authenticity of the inscription and identifies the image on the left as the Jade Emperor and the image on the right as Laozi.\textsuperscript{19} Other scholars suggest that this inscription is a later addition.\textsuperscript{20} Such heated debates about who is who highlight the icon-driven concerns voiced in mainstream Chinese religious art scholarship.

Moving beyond iconography, a similar stele dated 515, originally from southernmost Shaanxi province and now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, raises issues of workshop practice and visual convention pertinent to the making of Daoist icons (figs. 0.2a–b).\textsuperscript{21} The Boston stele is comparable to the stele commissioned by Wang A’shan: both sculptures have robes carved in long, dense, parallel lines; both are made of the same sandstone; both are almost identical in size. Even the details of the figural designs, such as the arch-shaped clothing patterns near the waists of the female attendants, and the cup-like ornaments at the center of their top knots, are similar. The overall resemblance of the two steles suggests that they may have originated in the same sixth-century southern Shaanxi.\textsuperscript{22}

The common design of the twin deities in these two sixth-century Daoist steles thus reflects a Buddhist-inspired visual convention\textsuperscript{23} that may have been trans-

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{f02a-b.jpg}
\caption{Votive offering of two seated figures and attendants. Northern Wei dynasty, dated 515. Sandstone. 28.3 × 28.3 cm. a. Front view with icons; b. Back view with inscriptions.}
\end{figure}
mitted by workshop artisans who made both Daoist and Buddhist icons. Once removed from its original Buddhist context, this design lacks specific iconographic features and is best understood as a ready-made template conveniently adopted to mass-produce the generic multitude of Daoist deities. Here we witness the flexible use of a figural type in a manner that differs from iconography as strictly defined. This generic quality is further reflected in the inscription (fig. 0.2b). Without specifying the identities of the images, the inscription simply acknowledges that the commissioner Jiao Cai—-a magistrate from Dayang county in southernmost Shaanxi province—“respectfully made a set of icons” to pray for the longevity of the emperor, the health and happiness of all officials, and the harmony of families.

It is a promising point of departure to acknowledge the gray zone of Daoist and Buddhist iconographies and to study this ambiguity as a cultural phenomenon. The anonymous Southern Song iconic painting (fig. 0.3) from a temple collection in Kyoto serves as an intriguing case. Against a seemingly blank background, the painting shows an old man seated frontally on a throne carried by an elephant. The exquisite canopy above him suggests that the image is an icon. Multiple extant Ming copies suggest that this image was popular. The motifs of an elephant and foreign attendants often accompany the iconic rendition of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Puxian) in Buddhist art, though the main icon of an old man in the scroll is quite different from conventional bodhisattva depictions. A recent Daoist art exhibition in Japan included this painting, suggesting that it may in fact represent Laozi. This Daoist connection is further supported by the several circular motifs outlined in gold and barely visible at the top of the picture. As Ide Seinosuke suggests, they may refer to stars.

More and more studies have come to challenge the conventional identifications of certain icons.
Sheng-chih Lin re-identifies the famous Liang Kai 梁楷 (ca. early thirteenth century) painting of the Southern Song dynasty as a representation associated with Daoist salvation; formerly it was identified as illustrations of the Daoist Scripture of the Yellow Court (Huangting jing 黃庭經) (fig. 0.4). Citing the Buddho-Daoist competition during the Yuan dynasty for historical context, Anning Jing similarly repositions two fragments of Daoist-looking murals in a Buddhist context, arguing that they are products made by Buddhists to glorify Buddhism. More recently, Christine Mollier calls attention to the pairing of Daoist and Buddhist icons in Tang-dynasty Sichuan cliff sculptures and suggests that the juxtaposition of a Laozi icon on the right and a Sakyamuni icon on the left reflected an intentional yet tacit choice by the commissioners, who placed Daoism in a role superior to Buddhism. The merit of this revival of iconographic studies is vividly reflected in a number of apparently Buddhist paintings produced in fourteenth-century China that reconnect with little-studied Chinese Manichaean art (fig. 0.5). The fact that the “true form” of Jesus can sometimes be disguised as the image of a Buddha further highlights the complex and flexible landscape of religious art in traditional China.

Given the value of iconographic studies, it is nevertheless problematic to assume that all Daoist deities depicted in paintings or statues iconographically match the pantheon described in sacred texts. The originally formless nature of the Daoist divinities described in written sources makes the creation of individual icons problematic and perhaps impossible. Thus, most images of Daoist deities appear generic, as reflected in extant artifacts. This makes it hard to differentiate one icon from another without relying on accompanying colophons. Even if some images bear distinct iconic features, within multiple Daoist experiences they function as more than just icons, for example, representing the visualized inner gods of the priest in performance.
The new study of Daoist images is fundamentally interdisciplinary. Rather than fixating on identifying and interpreting iconic images, this book endeavors to encompass Daoist images within what Clifford Geertz calls a cultural system of symbols, which act as both a model of and for reality. Daoist images examined through such a cultural lens are the threads that constitute the web of Chinese visual culture. They should not be seen as isolated and irrelevant to other cultural categories, such as those readily labeled “Buddhism,” “popular religion,” “science,” or “medicine.” Rather, they should be studied holistically, beyond the sectarian, media-based, methodological boundaries that compartmentalize image-related issues into what Eugene Wang calls “entrenched enclaves.”

While Geertz’s concept of a cultural system of symbols is useful in helping us to see Daoism in a larger cultural context, Talal Asad’s critique of Geertz’s treatment of religious belief in terms of its emphasis on “the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than a constituting activity in the world” is well taken. To further strengthen belief and action, the theoretical concept of practice encourages a shift “from the study of the theological or intellectual meanings of texts and images to the investigation of their production, consumption, and physicality.” Pertinent to this is Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, which, according to Catherine Bell, is “an irreducible ‘unit’ of culture” or a set of habitual principles “by which individual and collective practices are produced and the matrix in which objective structures are realized within the (subjective) dispositions that produce practices.” Bourdieu’s concept of practice is helpful in observing Daoist religious practices. For instance, Livia Kohn sees *habitus* as those Daoist experiences that are “learned and habituated in a culturally determined and structured manner.” *Habitus* could also refer to various mental and physical routines associated with Daoist ritual, which not only includes dynamic ritual performance but also the variety of material objects, architectural elements, and spatial designs in the sacred

**Fig. 0.5.** Manichaean painting of Jesus. Yuan dynasty, fourteenth century. Hanging scroll. Ink, color, and gold on silk. 153.5 × 58.7 cm.
arena. John Lagerwey, for example, famously acknowledges ritual as alternative scripture in the form of choreography and oral transmission; he stresses Daoist ritual performance over Daoist texts, which are but “fragments transmitted piecemeal.”46 Furthermore, the study of Daoist images sensitive to the material and visual dimensions of Daoist practices responds positively to anthropologist Webb Keane’s urge for a revisionist “anthropology of religion that does not expect a focus on ‘materiality’ merely to provide evidence of something else hidden and less tangible, such as belief.”47

An overarching theme that sums up the Daoist visual theory proposed in this book is the unique notion of true form, or *zhenxing* 真形.48 The concept of true form is not static, but instead entails a vigorous quest, an active journey of seeing underlying and secret phenomena through a series of metamorphoses. This particular Daoist cultivating process of seeing the hidden and unknown parallels the cultivation of Dao through which practitioners integrate themselves with the cosmos. In this regard, the Daoists define their own method of cultivated response to images, albeit it is rather different from Guo Ruoxu’s derogatory explanation. Daoist practices—meditation, visualization, and ritual performance alike—offer viewers concrete methods of cultivation for achieving “Daoist seeing.”

The notion of true form highlights the Daoist strategy of secrecy and power through knowledge transmission.49 As Hugh Urban eloquently points out, one of the basic strategies implemented widely among esoteric traditions of world religions is to “claim to possess very precious, rare, and valuable knowledge, while simultaneously partially revealing and largely concealing it.”50 In addition, esoterism entails elitism; it often involves a “skillful use of obscurity” by using “ambiguous language”51 intentionally and systematically to control “religious ideology”52 and to achieve, in Bourdieu’s words, the process of “misrecognition” that in turn empowers some people with the mysterious quality of “legitimate authority.”53 The multifaceted images, symbols, and writings associated with the notion of true form are the most effective and skillfully utilized “ambiguous language” in Daoism.

The ever-changing quality of true form is highlighted in the seventh-century Daoist monastic manual *Rules and Precepts for Worshiping the Dao* (*Fengdao kejie* 奉道科戒, DZ 1125). According to this text, the Heavenly Worthy has 500,000,000 appearances,54 none of which compares to his invisible true form:

The Great Image is formless. The Ultimate Truth is free from a physical form . . . They change and transform to manifest in physical shapes. Visible temporarily, they again return into hiding.

大像無形，至真無色…應變見身，暫顯還隱。55
Similarly, the robes of the nine-ranks immortals, as stated in the eighth-century *Rules and Precepts Regarding Ritual Garb* (*Fafu kejie wen* 法服科戒文, DZ 788), are all made from spontaneous clouds, floating mists, pure spontaneity, and wondrous qi. The higher in rank the deities are, the faster their garments change:

The highest-ranking god is the King of the Law of the Grand Network. His Cap of the Primordial Worthy changes ten thousand times in a flash; his nine-colored clothing with the precious cap comes with a thousand kinds of meeting and separating; the natural cloud robe has ten revolutions and nine transformations; the floral skirt of green brocade radiates the sevenfold brightness and fourfold light . . . all described above are flying clouds, floating mists, natural wondrous qi, condensed into the [immortal] robes . . . [the robes] change forms according to the environment . . . Changing a thousand times and transforming ten thousand times, they cannot be described.

The descriptions of the deities and their robes highlight the Daoist interpretation of true form as something linked to the cosmic qi and metamorphosis (*hua* 化). In Isabelle Robinet’s words, this transformation “involves making something that already exists in a given form appear under a new form.” In other words, an existing entity is reshaped in a different way and in a new medium so that divinities who are primordial, cosmic, and original as well as invisible in nature now appear in physical form and can be modeled in wood, metal, stone, and so on. At the same time the human body—visible and materially present—is transformed through ritual and cultivation into pure qi and invisible cosmic spirit. Metamorphosis thus applies not only to the gods, but also to Daoist believers. For the latter, the quest for true form thus entails refining internal energies through cultivation practices that allow them to go beyond the physical body to achieve a divine and formless “true body.”

With the transforming nature of Daoist true form thus stated, it is inevitable that Daoist images are perceived as fluctuating between the inner (or esoteric, *nei* 内) and the outer (or exoteric, *wai* 外) realms, in a bonded dichotomy that underlines the division and interconnectivity of the “inner chapters” (*neipian* 内篇) and “outer chapters” (*waipian* 外篇) outlined in this book. The division of the inner and the outer in Daoist visual culture has its basis in ritual. The inner ritual refers to the spiritual purification of the mind (*xin* 心), in contrast to the outer ritual, which is manifested in physical liturgical form (*xing* 形). The Daoist inner retreats (*neizhai* 内斋) trace their origin
to “the fast of the heart” (xinzhai 心齋) advocated by Confucius.\(^6^4\) In principle, such inner retreats aim at cultivating a state of mind that is “tranquil and solitary, roaming with the Dao” (tiandan jimo, yu dao ao’xiang 恬澹寂寞，與道翱翔).\(^6^5\) In practice, the inner layer of Daoist ritual mirrors closely the physical ritual performance, and takes place in the adept’s mind through visualization and meditation. This also prompts scholars to see the transmission of Daoist texts in inner and outer channels: the inner texts refer to those in internal circulation, whereas the outer texts are meant for general circulation.\(^6^6\)

Daoist images used and viewed in these changing contexts demand different receptions. They reflect the overall features of Daoist practice that, in Catherine Bell’s words, are “to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world.”\(^6^7\) Esoteric imagery evokes inner experiences and leads to the imaginary world of body and cosmos, cosmography, and the charts of mountains in heaven, earth, and hell. It connects to outer experiences, revealing the materiality (which includes paintings), spatiality, and ritual performance within the visible Daoist sacred space. Operating under the Daoist law of correspondence and transformation, the inner and outer mirror each other, and the boundary demarcating the two is fluent. This flexibility is vividly reflected in their constant convergence and mutual reliance, for the creation of mental images makes reference to the physical images on display in public ritual, and the picturing of the devotional images in liturgical paintings also mirrors the imaginary state of animated gods summoned by the priests performing the ritual. The inner or the esoteric, however, is superior to the outer or the exoteric.

The tension between Daoist inner and outer images calls to mind the bonded relation between mental and physical images in Christian devotion. Quoting the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, Hans Belting further situates mental and physical images in a reciprocal relationship, for just as the mental image is the “retour or the rémanence” of an objective image, the physical image cannot exist without the participation of a mental image because “an image by definition is one that is seen.”\(^6^8\)

Similarly, in his classic study on the power of images and the theory of response, David Freedberg describes how adepts generate invisible, mental images by means of visible, material ones (invisibilia per visibilia), interpreting some forms of meditation as a mental activity dependent on “recollections of real images and stored knowledge of them,” whether assisted by “a present figured object” or not.\(^6^9\) Freedberg proposes a two-way communication between images and beholders. The questions he encourages scholars to contemplate include “not only beholders’ symptoms and behavior, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do; not only what people do as a result of their relationship with imaged form, but also what they expect imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all.”\(^7^0\) On the one hand, the
images are represented as they are to carry certain meanings that evoke particular visual expectations of the beholders or users. On the other hand, what the beholders do while viewing the images plays a crucial role in determining their function. Freedberg’s attention to the interactive component in the study of images is useful in Daoist cases as well. Upon viewing the visualization pictures used to facilitate their private meditative practice, Daoist adepts are actively encouraged to imagine the energy transferred between their inner bodies and the stars. Similarly, the interactive effect of devotional paintings used in Daoist ritual lies in the dynamically drawn deities, whose movements evoke the swift descent and ascent of gods summoned by the priests during the ritual performance.

Equally important, the study of Daoist visual culture has much to contribute to the multifaceted relationship of text and image. Numerous Daoist symbols exist in the gray zone between images and texts. An image can be a text not only because it imitates writing, but also because Daoists see “viewing” as the faculty essential to decoding a text. From the Daoist perspective of sacred scriptures, moreover, an image is a text: any materialized form reflects the highest form of text—the writing from heaven, or heavenly writings (tianshu 天書), condensed from the graphic or picture-like patterns of the pure cosmic qi upon world creation. Alternatively, words are no longer so strictly demarcated from other representational forms. They are treated as counterparts analogous to the imagery of a bird, a mountain, or a human body; they are also imbued with a spatial dimension in the universe. This interlocking relationship between text and image enriches our interpretation of the picture theory creatively outlined by W. J. T. Mitchell. In stressing the tension between visual and verbal languages in Western culture, Mitchell encourages readers to go beyond the comparative or polarized model and think about the “imagetext” that denotes either “a composite, synthetic form” or “a gap or fissure in representation.” Borrowing Mitchell’s definition, the transforming and transcendental quality of Daoist “imagetexts” empowers Daoist visuality with immense freedom to traverse such pre-imposed categories as the abstract, the mimetic, the figural, the graphic, the visual, the textual, and so on.

Methodologically, this inquiry also responds to the growth of interest in material and visual culture—interdisciplinary trends that have significant impact on the study of Chinese art history. Increasingly art historians are focusing their attention on nonclassical styles and periods of supposed decline. They are shifting away from masterpieces and major artists to undistinguished artifacts, some of which even lack attribution. Scholars from other disciplines, too, are showing an increased interest in material culture and promote the examination of visual products in a broader cultural landscape. The study of material culture is a relatively young discipline; it investigates the “material, raw or processed, transformed by human action as expres-
sions of culture” and searches for the “cultural belief systems, the patterns of belief of a particular group of people in a certain time and place.” Within this framework, researchers have begun to unearth a wide spectrum of unpublished images, ranging from anonymous drawings, paintings, sculptures, and cave sites to textiles, clothing, furniture, ritual paraphernalia, and printed books. Echoing this tendency, scholarship on religious visual culture has blossomed: it treats visuality and materiality as essential aspects of religion. Some Sinologists are now examining issues of space, practice, and material culture in religion rather than focusing on doctrines or mental states. Others highlight religious exchanges and appropriations, revealing the more complex landscape of traditional Chinese religion.

Beyond the field of Chinese studies, art historian David Morgan, who works primarily on Christian materials, expands the framework for thinking about belief and advocates fervently for the study of “material religion.” Endorsing anthropologist Webb Keane’s notion that “religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms,” Morgan and his colleagues situate materiality and visuality squarely at the center of religion, as reflected in a series of thought-provoking studies that feature such key concepts as visual piety, the sacred gaze, visual religion, and the materiality of religion. In these discourses, visual materials are treated as primary sources for the study of religions:

The opportunity at hand is to elucidate the role that visuality plays in the social construction of reality. The desired outcome is that historians and scholars of religion will come to see images and visual practices as primary evidence in the study of religion and not merely as incidental illustrations. . . . The new study of religious visual culture begins with the assumption that visual artifacts should not be segregated from the experience of ceremony . . . or prayer. Visual practices help fabricate the worlds . . . and . . . present a promising way of deepening our understanding of how religions work.

Critical issues have been raised that challenge the mainstream scholarship of visual and material culture and facilitate a deeper integration of the studies of art and religion. For example, Morgan proposes a revisionist approach that not only examines “the physical objects” but also explores the immaterial and mental world to “evaluate objects in the broader register of mind, body, society, and culture.” In addition, S. Brent Plate, who works primarily on religions and films and is a fervent advocate of religious visual culture, identifies four themes for future studies in the expanding interdisciplinary field: intermediality and transmediality; the visuality and performativity of texts; synopticism; and ephemerality. Intermediality and
transmediality refer respectively to studies of the interrelationship and commonality of multimedia that “actively shape and reshape religions and cultures.” The visuality and performativity of texts, on the other hand, highlights the visual dimension of sacred texts and stresses how sacred texts are “performed” and not just “read.” Synopticism acknowledges the morphing and merging of religious traditions by way of the sharing of certain “symbols, icons, and designs.” Last but not least, ephemeral calls attention to the now-lost visuality that entails a “multimedia, interactive dimension” of images for which “formal and iconographical approaches” may seem only to “scratch the surface of the meanings possible.” The ephemeral ritual objects, intermediary and transmediary imagery, and performative actions that will be studied in this book go beyond the conventional domain of Daoist art, painting and sculpture, what Mircea Eliade called the “hard things” that make history.

The quest for Daoist true form in this book is thus grounded in the various facets of the conceptual frameworks outlined above. It also benefits from the growing accessibility to illustrated books and archaeological materials, such as those found at Dunhuang and among funerary artifacts. Alternatively, a new perspective on Daoist visual culture provides an opportunity to re-examine these primary sources in a “more dynamic, fluid, and active” context, where “performance, movement, and bodily understandings in relation to space and material culture” may challenge the conventional analysis of the seemingly static images encountered in books or in the archaeological context. In this expanding view, Daoist paintings of all types and provenances can also be understood afresh.

**Aniconic, Immaterial, and Ephemeral**

This study, which ventures into uncharted territory, hopes to bring to the fore three modes of images central to Daoist symbolism: aniconic, immaterial/invisible, and ephemeral. Aniconic imagery, possibly because it echoes the mysterious and the formless, is often nonfigural and nonmimetic. This is evident not only in the talismans, magical writings, and diagrammatical and word-like images that crowd Daoist scriptures, but also in the elaborate writings imbedded in ritual objects such as banners, mirrors, and paperwork used in Daoist rituals.

Daoism’s aniconic mode is its most significant contribution to the sphere of Chinese visual culture and distinguishes it from its icon-dominated Buddhist counterpart. It also reflects Daoism’s fundamental respect for and obsession with writing, which is often deemed to be a sacred material form connected to the transforming cosmic energy. Whereas some perplexing symbols may be legible to the trained eye, many others are meant to be incomprehensible. It is this incomprehensibility of images
that triggers the mystic visuality beyond here and now, thus guiding the adept to the otherworldly realm in meditation or ritual. Furthermore, the densely intertwined connections between the image and text go beyond the notion of “imagetext” proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell, providing a powerful means of bridging the image–text disjunction.

In Daoism, the immaterial and invisible are deemed to be most closely associated with true form, which is therefore superior to any other material object: the latter is always merely a reflection of the former. Visualization is a key method by which adepts make invisible forms visible and vice versa. Recent studies of images and the brain explain how visualization works. According to Livia Kohn, internal imagery “is one of the earliest forms of cognition that connects to deep levels of the brain”; it creates a more direct vision than the “more distant experience conveyed by verbal communication or abstract thinking.” Visualized images are located in the right brain hemisphere, which connects to the unconscious and the mythical, as opposed to the left brain hemisphere, which relates to the conscious and the abstract. More amazingly, as John Ratey notes, the cognitive action associated with visualization is “carried out by the regions of the brain responsible for actual movement.”

Indeed, more and more recent studies that explore the intersection of neuroscience with meditation have offered evidence for how meditation changes body and brain physiology and have demonstrated the complexity of the brain’s activities in a meditative state. Applying the concept of neuroplasticity, which refers to “the brain changes that occur in response to experience,” scholars find that the brain shows an enhanced and sustained attention to internal events during meditation. As Katya Rubia observes, “the subjective experiences of mental silence and positive emotions during meditation have very specific neurophysiological correlates in the activation and connectivity of regions that mediate internalised attention and positive affect.” Tests done with Tibetan Buddhist monks also led V. D. Deshmukh to conclude that in a meditative state there is a significant increase in signals in brain structures that are “involved in generating attention, emotion, and imagery.”

Viewed in this light, mental images in practitioners’ visualization play an essential role in Daoist image making. Consequently, Daoist masters produced illustrated meditation manuals intended to help the adept better understand “what it is” and “where it is” in his visualization practice. Even manuals without illustrations encouraged adepts to engage in active mental image making and to compare those images with actual images. Of the many illustrations preserved in Daoist visualization and liturgical manuals, significant numbers are devoted to mapping Daoist cosmography, ranging from the inner body to the stars, heaven, the earthly paradise, and the underground. After all, mapping entails controlling thus generating power. Daoist cosmic maps provide outlines that allow practitioners to roam in the world,
empowering them to control the cosmos. In spite of this, the Daoist cosmography reflected in these assorted images is by no means a systematic complex. It blends the real and the imaginary, the representational and the nonrepresentational into a "heterotopia": the term was coined by Michel Foucault to counter the idea of utopia and to refer to "effectively enacted utopias" where other real places found within the culture "are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."\textsuperscript{107}

In addition to the aniconic and the immaterial, one should also give due weight to the ephemeral creations of multimedia ritual objects, sacred space, and ritual performance—concerns that echo the methodological approach outlined by Plate.\textsuperscript{108} The ephemeral dimension of Daoist visual culture is closely tied to the underpinning notion of transformation of true form so prominent in Daoist visual theory. This is best manifested in ritual consumption, movement, and performance—something often excluded from traditional history based on written documentation.\textsuperscript{109} Some ritual objects may not have survived because they were intentionally destroyed after use in the ritual process.\textsuperscript{110} In ritual contexts, objects were moved around or carried by practitioners to attract, invite, or communicate with the gods, souls, or demons. Similarly, temporary spatial constructions, for example, for altars for the gods or places for the souls, were usually dismantled after the rituals occurred. These specific spatial designs constructed Daoist ritual space as a microcosm reflecting the Daoist worldview and are charged with spatial and temporal meanings as well. This study thus takes into account the dynamic quality of Daoist visuality transformed by time, action, performance, and practice. Both ritual object and ritual space help to construct an interactive site for the theatrical ritual performance, whose fleeting spectacle is instrumental to the understanding of Daoist visuality as represented in physical objects such as paintings or statues.\textsuperscript{111}

**Facets of Daoism**

The majority of Daoist visual and textual sources were either produced or compiled in the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. They form the main data bank for this study, but in many ways continue styles and cosmologies first evolved between the end of the Han and the end of the Tang dynasty, or from about 200 to 900 CE.\textsuperscript{112} During this period, Daoists developed their core ideas and practices: rituals for communication with the gods, visualization and internal alchemy as meditative practices, codification of liturgy, proliferation of salvation ritual, and imperial patronage.

Three major Daoist schools play a dominant role in the development of religious Daoism: Celestial Masters (T‘anshi 天師), which arose in Sichuan in the second century and spread to the north and southeast of China by the fourth century;
Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清), which was based on a series of Daoist scriptures revealed to the elite circle of the Jiangnan 江南 (lower Yangzi) region in the mid-fourth century; and Numinous Treasure (Lingbao 靈寶), which began around the year 400 and is noted for its appropriations of Buddhist ideas, promotion of universal salvation, and codification of Daoist liturgy.\footnote{113}

The fourth and fifth centuries saw the formation of Daoist communications with gods in written terms. Followers of the Celestial Masters understood sickness to be caused by demons who invaded the sufferer’s body as a result of moral failings. To effect a cure, they confessed their sins to gods understood as celestial bureaucrats by presenting written memorials prepared by priests.\footnote{114} Their way of communicating with the gods corresponds to what communications theorist James Carey calls the “cultural approach to communication.” Its purpose was to construct and maintain “an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action” and not to transmit “intelligent information.”\footnote{115} The rich collection of Daoist paperwork produced by the tradition, ranging from memorials and registers to orders, mandates, and contracts with the supernatural world, forms an impressive repository of visual materials upon which this study has selectively drawn.\footnote{116}

Divine communications go both ways. By praying to the gods, Daoists believed that the gods would answer through the spirit-mediums’ writings or through sacred scriptures discovered in mountain grottoes.\footnote{117} An oft-cited event documenting such a divine encounter is found in the so-called Highest Clarity revelations.\footnote{118} From 364 to 370, the spirit-medium Yang Xi 杨羲 (330–86), who worked for the aristocratic Xu 许 family and was active in the elite circle of Mount Mao (Maoshan 茅山), hand copied a series of revealed texts now known as the Highest Clarity scriptures.\footnote{119} Written in elegant literary form, these texts reflect the elite’s fascination with visual meditations noted for mystic visions of cosmic flight and the deification of the inner body—both overarching themes crucial to Daoist esoteric image making. Through their emphasis on personal engagement in mental concentration, they also mirror Highest Clarity practice.\footnote{120}

Finally, the Numinous Treasure school expounded ritual and codified Daoist liturgy.\footnote{121} With this development came a collection resembling the prototype for the Daoist Canon, a compilation of ritual materials and precepts codified by Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–77).\footnote{122} Lu utilized a unique cataloguing method, dividing the texts into Three Caverns (Sandong 三洞),\footnote{123} “the basis for much of the subsequent Daoist tradition.”\footnote{124}

Daoists of both the Highest Clarity and Numinous Treasure traditions elevated the heavenly writings as the primordial form of the sacred scriptures, the “heavenly blueprints” or “primordial symbols of all phenomena.”\footnote{125} To them, these writings
predated the origin of the universe and were invisible to human beings, a notion that has continued to prevail in Daoism to the present day. Numerous samples of magic and talismanic Daoist writings reflect this long-lasting obsession with mysterious writings from heaven.\textsuperscript{126}

In the Song dynasty, Daoism underwent an “exuberant renaissance,” and old traditions converged with new ones.\textsuperscript{127} Since many modern Daoist practices can be traced back to the Song, some scholars have identified the period as the beginning of the “modern” era in Daoist history.\textsuperscript{128}

The Northern Song imperial court took a leading role in merging earlier Daoist texts into canonical compilations. One such collection is the oft-cited eleventh-century *The Bookcase of the Clouds with Seven Labels* (*Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤, DZ 1032), which may reflect a “condensed version” of an imperially sponsored canon—lost today—that presumably preserved numerous Six Dynasties scriptures “codified, edited, annotated, and augmented in the Tang and culminating” in the collection under Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 998–1022).\textsuperscript{129} As printing became more widely available, moreover, the first Daoist canon was issued under Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1125). It was produced in Fuzhou 福州, a major printing center, where multiple versions of the Buddhist canon were also published in the eleventh century.\textsuperscript{130} In addition, fragmented sources also suggest that Huizong was much involved in Daoist image making, creating and sponsoring talismans and devotional paintings such as a set of the Three Pure Ones (Sanqing 三清).

The Song also saw the emergence of several new Daoist schools.\textsuperscript{132} Divine Empyrean (Shenxiao 神霄) was promoted by Huizong in the twelfth century;\textsuperscript{133} Celestial Heart (Tianxin 天心)\textsuperscript{134} and Clarified Tenuity (Qingwei 清微) prospered in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They all produced cosmological diagrams and talismans that they included in their new texts on healing, exorcism, and salvation rituals.\textsuperscript{135} The growth of ritual further stimulated the production of some monumental compendia, notably of Numinous Treasure ritual, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{136}

At the same time, visualization continued to be a mainstay in the newly codified rituals, as new practices in internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) evolved. Internal alchemy is best described as an innovative development in breathing and meditative practice, “a form of subtle body ecstasy,” that aimed at nourishing life and attaining immortality.\textsuperscript{137} It forms a backdrop to the emergence of a new type of body imagery whose physiological features find common ground with the body imagery used in medicine. Despite its importance, Song Daoism remains largely understudied\textsuperscript{138} and will therefore be the primary focus of this book.
Primary Sources

The most comprehensive primary source for this study is the imperially sponsored Daoist Canon (Daozang 道藏) printed during the Zhengtong 正統 reign in 1445. It contains a vast collection of material, including illustrations for visualization, body charts, ritual diagrams, cosmological maps, talismans, and magical scripts. Of the nearly 1500 texts, many date from medieval times and were preserved in the now-lost twelfth-century canon compiled under Emperor Huizong; over half of the manuscripts come from liturgical texts written between the tenth century and the 1445 printing. Furthermore, the theoretical structure (for example, the Three Caverns) of the Daoist Canon can be traced back to the first organized collection compiled by Lu Xiujing in the fifth century. Although the Canon contains the largest database of images related to religious Daoism, scholars have rarely studied them.

The original woodblocks of the 1445 Daozang had been kept in the imperial Great Hall of the Brightness (Da guangming dian 大光明殿) at the Qing court until the building was burned during the Boxer war in August 1900. One of the few extant copies of the Canon available at that time was the set preserved in Beijing’s White Cloud Temple (Baiyun guan 白雲觀), bestowed by the Ming emperor in 1448. In 1926 the publisher Hanfen lou 涵芬樓 in Shanghai published facsimiles made after the White Cloud Temple version. Beginning in the 1960s, Xinwenfeng 新文豐 Publishers in Taipei, Taiwan, published a reduced edition in sixty volumes, which was followed by a mainland edition reduced to thirty-six volumes based on the Hanfen lou reprint. In addition, more and more CDs and other electronic formats are available both in mainland China and Taiwan nowadays. In particular, the Academia Sinica in Taipei has included a searchable version in their electronic database (Scripta Sinica) since 2009. All these new additions make the Daozang even more accessible to modern scholars.

The present study benefits greatly from the monumental compilation, The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang (or Daozang tongkao 道藏通考), co-edited by Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen. The product of a long-term group effort by Daoist scholars since the 1970s, this compendium provides the most up-to-date interpretive studies and dating of the texts. Mirroring the fully illustrated Canon, the compilation displays assorted images and thus brings to the fore the diverse visual dimensions of the texts. The editors further differentiate between secret instructions for internal circulation among Daoist practitioners and generally available materials shared with the public. For example, Highest Clarity visualization and meditation texts and Numinosous Treasure liturgical manuals are all classified as esoteric. Medicinal manuals and
texts on internal alchemy, on the other hand, are meant for a general audience. The division between internal and external circulation of texts provides a useful model for considering the reception of Daoist images.

Daoist *Tu* in the *Daozang*

From a visual perspective, the miscellaneous Daoist symbols and pictures (*futu 符圖*) preserved in the Daoist Canon belong to Chinese *tu 圖*, a broad category of imagery that includes pictures, drawings, illustrations, charts, diagrams, maps, designs, and other nonlinear texts—the role of which, as a whole, is downplayed in knowledge transfer in traditional China. A systematic study of these Daoist images will not only help to better understand Daoism but also assist in recognizing the function of *tu* in Chinese visual culture and knowledge transmission. Catherine Despeux and Franciscus Verellen, among others, have identified the common ground of Daoist *tu* as showing the adept “the interior structure” or “the true shape” of “the workings of the universe in its raw and undiluted state.”

How to use the Daoist *tu* in the Ming *Daozang* remains a challenge. While dating *Daozang* images is difficult, some provisional assumptions can be made that will generate more debates or advance scholarship. On the one hand, as Franciscus Verellen cautions, an illustration may not be coeval with the text that it illustrates; therefore it is difficult to date it any earlier than the 1445 date of printing. On the other hand, it is beneficial to think beyond the Ming framework and start looking for more historical references for the *Daozang* images that link them to other visual sources outside the Daoist Canon.

The *Daozang* editors placed illustrated pictures and symbols in different categories. Images are part of miscellaneous documents classified under diverse headings: texts (benwen 本文), divine symbols (shenfu 神符), jade instructions (yujue 玉訣), numinous charts (lingtu 靈圖), rituals (weiyi 威儀), techniques (fangfa 方法), miscellaneous arts (zhongshu 羣術), and hagiographies (jizhuan 記傳)—that is, eight out of the total of twelve categories in the collection. Images also appear in the Four Supplements (Sifu 四輔), which include materials from lesser schools: Great Mystery (Taixuan 太玄), Great Peace (Taiping 太平), Great Clarity (Taiqing 太清), and Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi 正一).

Although such classifications make the *Daozang* a useful catalogue showing how Daoist imagery in general is associated with different functions and sectarian traditions, it does not provide much help in detecting the typologies of images sorted by visual features. For example, talismans and magical writings appear not only under divine symbols but almost everywhere. Similarly, visualization illustrations
with strong narrative elements appear most frequently in documents labeled as texts, numinous diagrams, techniques, and Orthodox Unity. Overall, this is challenging to modern readers, especially because certain symbols that would traditionally fall into the “image” camp when applying the image-text dichotomy are, in fact, treated by the Daoists as sacred texts. This reflects the unique Daoist intellectual framework that, as Franciscus Verellen puts it, shows “the interlocking relationship between textual and graphic elements in Daoist documents.”

A good example that further complicates the notion of this “interlocking relationship” is the idea of so-called talismanic characters (fuzi 符字), recorded in the eleventh-century Bookcase of the Clouds with Seven Labels. Here talismans (fu), writings (shu), and graphics (tu) are singled out as three types of symbols bearing interlocking relationships with one another:

Talismans generally apply the configurations of clouds and stars. Writings differentiate and analyze the meanings of units of discourse. Graphics depict the forms of numinous transformations. Nevertheless, talismans blend written elements and images, and writings are imbedded with pictorial or graphic elements to serve both figurative and phonetic functions.

In approaching Chinese tu, some scholars have paired tu with hua 畫 (paintings) and shu 書 (texts). For example, Craig Clunas interprets tu as assorted configurations often found in texts and contrasts them with hua, conventionally translated as “paintings.” Other scholars working on intellectual, cultural, and scientific history define tu as an alternative knowledge system complementing that formed by shu, that is, conventional written texts. When comparing tu and shu, mainstream scholars cite the Southern Song bibliographer Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–62):

Graphics (tu) are the warp threads and writings (shu) are the weft. As warp and weft alternate to form the pattern of a fabric (wen) [so graphics and writings alternate to form the meaning of a text]. To see writings without graphics is like hearing a voice without seeing the form; to see graphics without writings is like seeing a person but not hearing his words… Scholars in the past conducted their scholarship with useful methods. They placed graphics on the left and writings on the right. [Hence] they sought visions in graphics, and principles in writings.
Although Zheng Qiao elevates the image to be equal to the text, he views image and text as two discrete knowledge systems. The dichotomy of text and image, however, fails to explain the semiotic complexity of Daoist experiences. In this regard, Mitchell’s notion of the “imagetext” is helpful for the current study since Daoist graphics often exhibit “the inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse,” and “flexible, experimental, and ‘high-tension’ relations between words and images.” As this book will demonstrate, the complex interconnection and flexible interchangeability of text and image embodied in Daoist tu will enrich our understanding of the text-and-image relationship in Chinese visual culture and expand W. J. T. Mitchell’s definition of “imagetext.”

Overview of the Book

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1 (chaps. 1, 2, and 3) examines inner or esoteric Daoist images associated with meditation, visualization, and breathing practices; part 2 (chaps. 4, 5, and 6) examines outer or exoteric Daoist works, notably the material culture and spatial design of Daoist ritual space, ritual performance, and liturgical paintings. The division into inner and outer matches the way in which Daoist knowledge was transmitted. Viewed as a whole, the six chapters thus provide different access points for the Daoist grotto heavens (dongtian), the mystic otherworld in the depths of the mountains.

Chapter 1 investigates how the Daoist perception of body and cosmos unfolded over time. It focuses on four types of images: body gods, imaginary journeys to the stars, grotesque spirits and body worms, as well as the body transformed through internal alchemy. Most of the images of body gods and of journeys to the stars are found in texts circulated among selected adepts. This explains why the images were considered esoteric even though they are well represented in the Daoist Canon. In contrast, illustrations of body worms and body charts used by internal alchemists were accessible to the public and in general circulation. These images cross over into the secular context and are much like depictions of disease and anatomical charts in medical texts.

Chapter 2 takes the macrocosmic view and analyzes the shaping of Daoist cosmography. Cosmographic charts, especially those preserved in the Southern Song-Yuan liturgical manuals, provide a vivid glimpse of the otherwise abstract Daoist cosmos.
Painting, architecture, and ritual robes shed additional light on visions of heaven, earth, and the underworld. Although some cosmological models studied are consistent with Buddhist and earlier prototypes, others prove to be uniquely Daoist.

Chapter 3 explores the unique genre of Daoist pictures known as true form charts (*zhēnxīng tu* 真形圖), especially those associated with earthly paradises. These charts highlight the unique Daoist notion of true form, a superior body attained through meditation or spiritual revelation. Their aniconic visual quality is essential to Daoist realization, which aims to perfect the individual by uniting with an agent perceived as absolute—the Dao. While uniquely Daoist, their puzzling configurations relate to those found in cartography, *fēngshuǐ* 風水, calligraphy, talismans, and herbal medicine.

Chapter 4, which opens part 2, examines the materiality of Daoist ritual space, unveiling the abundant display of ritual objects, written documents, and other paraphernalia used in a symbolic spatial arrangement. It provides a virtual tour through the sacred space, taking the reader to the abode of the gods, the place of the dead, and across the bridge to heaven. Objects used during rituals were usually burned or buried, just as temporary edifices erected for the rituals were commonly dismantled. Still, we can examine how they looked, what materials they were made of, and how they worked.

Chapter 5 discusses the Yellow Register Purgation, a salvation ritual popular in Song China that is comparable to the Buddhist Water Land ritual. Song liturgical manuals, as well as modern ethnographic documentation, highlight ritual performance as a unique aspect of Daoist visual culture. Theatrical moments occur when the ritual master summons the gods in front of the altar and when he performs a soul-saving dance at the border of the ritual area symbolizing hell.

Chapter 6 studies the dynamism of Daoist paintings, exploring their process of manufacture and visual conventions, as well as their role in ritual. The Southern Song triptych of the *Three Officials of Heaven, Earth, and Water* provides a point of departure. Three pictorial types are employed to depict mobile deities, which reflect animating processes visualized by the ritual master. The paintings in ritual context thus serve primarily as the material embodiment of the mobile deities evoked by the master.

The journey through the world of Daoist visual culture undertaken in this study is not linear, but is instead like the meandering path one follows through the grotto heavens. It begins in the mind that imagines body gods and starry travels and ends with the material representations of Daoist divinities. All forms investigated, moreover, should be understood as transforming manifestations of the mystic true form of the Dao, which is the Way, the One, the center of the universe.