

A Note on the Dates for the Revelation of the Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart (Tianxin zhengfa)

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Introduction

The tenth century in Chinese history is referred to as a "transitional period", bridging the years between the fall of the Tang in 907 and the start of the Song dynasty that began in 960. The period in between these two dates is only very rarely treated in Western and Chinese research, which has to do with the apparent confusion resulting from the division of the country into a northern half and a southern half. The north was dominated by five succeeding dynasties, while the south experienced the existence of several states and empires that ruled simultaneously.

As the Song dynasty arose out of this confused situation it is nevertheless worthwhile to take a closer look at what actually happened within those 53 years and on the form of transition that occurred. Much of what came to be identified with the new Song dynasty had its roots in the preceding period of the Five Dynasties and Ten States, such as the preservation of books, that were going to be the foundation of the Song imperial collection, the personnel that was going to use them for the compilation of some of the most influential works during the early Northern Song, among many others.

In this paper I concentrate on one aspect which is relevant for the understanding of events and people in the southern part of China prior to the reunification of the empire by the Song dynasty in 960. More specifically, the matter in question is the origin of a text of an exorcistic practice and cult that came to be linked to Daoism called *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart (Tianxin zhengfa)* and which attained some prominence under emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125) of the Song.

Tan Qiao, Tan Zixiao, and the Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart

The origins of the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart*, whose practitioners claimed to be able to perform exorcism, and which subsequently came to be linked to Daoism, are recorded in the *Case History of Fouqiu, Wang and Guo, the Three Perfected from Mt. Huagai (Huagai shan Fouqiu Wang Guo san zhenjun shishi)* a text, which is composed of several other texts.¹ The first two chapters are attributed to Shen Tingrui, a Daoist practitioner, who died in 985.² The entry in question reads:

¹ On this text see Judith M. Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature: Tenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Berkeley, 1987), 78-81.

² Shen Tingrui has biographical entries in his father's Shen Bin biographies in Long Gun, *Jiangnan yeshi* 6.6b-7a; in Lu You, *Nan Tang shu* (Beijing, 1986) 7.29; Wu Renchen, *Shiguo chunqiu* (Beijing, 1983) 29.416. Shen Bin had served under the first and the second rulers of the Southern Tang. In the *Nan Tang jinshi*, which was written in 977, we find the information, that Shen at that time was still living in the region of Mt. Yusi (modern day Hunan) and Mt. Fuyun (modern day Hubei). See *Nan Tang jinshi* (Congshu jicheng), 4. Thus it seems he was prominent enough to be mentioned by Zheng. The two chapters in question form part of Shen's otherwise lost

Rao Dongtian was a man from Linchuan in Fuzhou prefecture (Jiangxi). In the beginning he was a clerk in [his home] district. Later he dreamt of a divine being who told him: "Since you use your heart in a balanced way and you grasp the rules in an upright way, your name should make heaven shake." When he awoke from the dream and became aware of it, he changed [his name to] Dongtian.³ One night he saw a multi-coloured radiance rise before the altar for the ascension (?) to Mt. Huagai. He climbed the mountain to the summit, and ...⁴ following the radiance he dug in the earth and found a golden box. When he opened it he saw an immortal's scripture in jade characters whose title read: "Tianxin jing zhengfa" (Correct Rites of the Scripture of the Celestial Heart). He consequently took the spiritual text but nobody understood its wisdom. An immortal being told him: "You, sir, should see master Tan with the name Zixiao who can teach you in it." From then onwards he searched him for several years, and finally met the master at Nanfeng. ...⁵

This is the accepted version of the events that lead to the discovery of the text, who was to play a major role during the reign of the last Northern Song emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1124). In the preface of a later text, the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart of Shangqing[-Daoism]* (*Shangqing tianxin zhengfa*) by Deng Yougong (1210-1279), we find an exact date for the discovery of the scriptures:

On the 15th day of the 8th month of the 5th year Chunhua (994) a real and virtuous gentleman⁶ saw in the night above the peak of a mountain a brilliant multi-coloured radiance. ...⁷

The date given corresponds to September 22, 994. According to Didier this is proof that Tan Zixiao lived at least until that year, and from evidence he carefully presents, ends up with 910-994 as the approximate life dates for Tan Zixiao. All of this fits into the narrative that Robert Hymes presents in his description of the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Hearts*, where the new cult is of definitive and undeniable Northern Song origin.⁸ There is however a possibility, that the origins of the text are much earlier, a possibility that John Didier has alluded to already some time back⁹ and one that I will outline in more detail in the following.

Er zhenjun shilu. There is no reason to doubt that this book was written by Shen, since his father had also shown great interest in Daoist matters and written a text about them. This earned him an entry in Xu Xuan's (917-992) work on extraordinary people in the region of the Yangzi and Huai rivers, the *Jiang Huai yiren lu*.

³ "To make heaven shake" (*dongtian*) is homonymous with Rao's name Dongtian (grotto heaven).

⁴ I cannot make any sense of the character *han* that appears at this place.

⁵ *Huagai shan Fouqiu Wang Guo san zhenjun shishi* (HY 777) 5.313.

⁶ I have not been able to find a more convincing translation for *roushen dashi*. *Roushen* means the body and is used in Buddhism to denote a Bodhisattva for instance, while *dashi* means a man with high qualities.

⁷ *Shangqing tianxin zhengfa* (HY 566) 1.743.

⁸ Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 26-46.

⁹ John Didier, "Mssrs. T'an, Chancellor Sung, and the Book of Transformation (Hua Shu): Texts and the Transformations of Traditions", in *Asia Major* 11.1 (1998):99-150. Note that Didier's article does not appear in Hymes' account.

The story about the revelation of the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart* was known to Shen Tingrui, who at the date given by Deng Yougong had been dead for almost ten years. Why should we accept the second version of the story as the correct one? Shen Tingrui's text places the events at an unspecified time, which leaves a lot of space for more speculations. Moreover, the connection between the two texts is only made in the Southern Song in an anonymous interlinear commentary to Shen Tingrui's text, which Boltz vaguely dates in the years 1138-1293.¹⁰

Rao Dongtian does not have any biographical entry in any historical work from Song times. He is however credited with being the first adept of the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart* after its recovery. A close look at texts dealing with the period preceding the Song dynasty however is rather helpful. In the following I will attempt to clarify the identity of Mr. Rao.

The first person we meet in our investigation is a Yao Dong, who is the addressee of a petition by Song Qiqiu, asking him for help at a time, when he was still unemployed and poor. That is all the information the *Historical Record of the Region Around the Yangzi (Jiangbiao zhi)*, written in 1010, provides us with.¹¹ The *Private History of Jiangnan (Jiangnan yeshi)* which probably was written between 1010 and 1023, taking up the information about Song's initial poverty and his search for a patron, has this to say about Mr. Rao:

The (later) first ruler (of the Southern Tang) [Li Bian] at that time was prefect of Shengzhou (in Jiangsu). His close friend Rao Dongtian left the capital to take up the post of commander in Luling (Ji'an). Since Qiqiu sent him a name card, he talked with him a whole day and welcomed him as his retainer. He entertained him with feasts from dusk til dawn¹²; afterwards he asked his advice in present matters. A short while afterwards Dongtian gave up his command and was ordered to return to Guangling (Yangzhou). He had hardly arrived there when he seriously fell ill and was about to die. Thereupon, in his last will, he recommended [Song] to the last ruler.¹³

Amazingly, this story fits in some parts Shen Tingrui's, in addition to the exactly similar characters for the name. Rao Dongtian is an official and he is here serving in the geographical region of what constitutes today the province of Jiangxi. Moreover we learn that he was a good friend of Li Bian. It is quite obvious that Song deliberately approached Rao to gain access to bureaucratic circles and Li Bian, who then was beginning to accumulate influence and power.

The *Separate Historical Record of Jiangnan (Jiangnan bielü)* by Chen Pengnian (961-1017) contains this anecdote as well, but the cavalry officer here is called Yao Dongtian. Chen stresses the fact that Yao recommends Song to Li Bian, and Li Bian thinks that Song's skills are 'extraordinary'.¹⁴

The *Supplement to the History of the Five Dynasties (Wudai shi bu)* is embellishing this story even more, giving more details about Song's dire conditions.¹⁵ He is helped by a singing girl (who appeared already in the *Separate*

¹⁰ Boltz, *Survey*, 287, n. 217.

¹¹ Zheng Wenbao, *Jiangbiao zhi* (Xuehai leibian-ed.), 3.4a

¹² The *Siku quanshu* recension reads here "[Rao] feasted with him from dusk til dawn".

¹³ *Jiangnan yeshi* 4.1a-b.

¹⁴ Chen Pengnian, *Jiangnan bielü* (Xuehai leibian-ed.), 6a.

¹⁵ Tao Yue (?-1022), *Wudai shi bu* (1012), 2.10b-11b.

Historical Record of Jiangnan), who provides him with money to buy paper, ink and a brush, and he sets up a poem, to introduce himself to Yao Dongtian. The latter is described as a military commander in Huainan and is known for his sympathetic attitude towards scholars. As Song's poem is alluding to a potential change of dynasty, Yao is getting angry and refuses to see him. Thereupon Song changes the tone of his note using very humble vocabulary, which is noted by Yao, who then starts to support Song. There is no mention however of a relationship between Yao and Li Bian. Though the family name of Song's patron is different from the story in the *Private History of Jiangnan*, we can assume with certainty that Yao Dongtian is identical with Rao Dongtian. The different character for the family name may hint to an oral transmission of the story and the name, for Yao and Rao are phonetically rather close together.

A further modification of the name but not of the person itself is found in Lu You's *History of the Southern Tang* (*Nan Tang shu*). The relevant entry reads:

When Li Bian was prefect of Shengzhou, Qiqiu was able to see him with the help of the cavalry commandant Yao Kezhan.¹⁶

From what we know so far, Yao Kezhan, can be none else than the Yao Dong of the *Historical Record of the Region Around the Yangzi*, the Rao Dongtian of the *Private History of Jiangnan*, and the Yao Dongtian of the *Supplement to the History of the Five Dynasties*. It is tempting to speculate that the Rao Dongtian of the *Private History of Jiangnan* is the same as the Rao Dongtian mentioned by Shen Tingrui.¹⁷

The religious as well as the purely historical texts provide Rao or Yao with a specific regional background and anchor him in Jiangxi. This is the same place that is regarded as the origins of the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart*.

Boltz follows the Deng Yougong account in establishing the date for the revelation as well as Catherine Despeux¹⁸, so that we are faced with statements from both authors, concerning the 12th century as the time when the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart* flourished.¹⁹

Didier accepts the Deng Yougong record as correct, as this fits his argument for a distinction between Tan Qiao and Tan Zixiao. It should be noted here that there are no texts from the Northern Song, that link the both in any way.

At the same time Didier dismisses the historical accuracy of the record preserved in the *Comprehensive Mirror on Successive Generations of Transcendents and Those Who Embody the Dao* (*Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian*), a hagiographical work usually attributed to Zhao Daoyi (fl. 1294-1307). This text relates how Tan Zixiao traveled to Jinling (modern day Nanjing) and was given an audience.²⁰

¹⁶ Lu You, *Nan Tang shu*, 4.15.

¹⁷ In a commentary to the *Huagai shan Fouqiu Wang Guo san zhenjun shi* we find Rao Dongtian as Rao Dongqi. See *Huagai shan Fouqiu Wang Guo san zhenjun shi* (HY 777), 2.286.

¹⁸ Catherine Despeux, *Taoisme et corps humain: le Xiuzhen tu* (Paris, 1994), 173-174. Tan Zixiao is mentioned as the 'founder' of the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart* on 185, note 91.

¹⁹ On the dating problem and Tan Zixiao see also Poul Andersen, "Taoist Talismans and the History of the Tianxin Tradition" (review article of Monika Drexler, *Daoistische Schriftmagie: Interpretationen zu den Schriftamuletten Fu im Daozang* (München, 1994), *Acta Orientalia* 57 (1996), 3-8.

²⁰ *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* (HY 296) 43.8a. Note that there is a separate entry on Tan Qiao which describes how Tan Qiao met with Song Qiqiu who appropriated Tan's *Huashu*. See *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* (HY 296) 39.16a-18a.

Didier indicates that it was not possible for Tan to meet Li Bian after the fall of Min, as that occurred in 946, three years after Li had died. The problem here is twofold, concerning one of translation as well as one of understanding of the historical situation. Apparently Didier translated *Min wang* as "the fall of Min". However *wang* may also be translated as disorder, chaos, decline and the like. Such 'disorder' actually happened in late 939, when the ruling emperor Kangzong (Wang Chang) was killed. He himself had come to the throne by murdering his father in 935. Though the history of that empire (as of some of the other states in the period) thus is rather 'bloody', it would appear that the regicide and the following killing of even more people is a brutal enough event to gain it the designation 'disorder'. Moreover Kangzong had surrounded himself with Daoists and shamans who earlier had assassinated two uncles of Kangzong and their sons. Thus Tan may very well have been in Fujian from the reign of Wang Shenzhi (907-925) until 939, when Wang Chang was murdered. It is understandable that Tan wanted to move since in the cleansing following the usurpation, Chen Shouyuan, a Daoist priest and his colleague, as well as one of the shamans were caught and executed. This example and the change in government may have been motivation enough for Tan to escape and await the further developments abroad. In 939 he would have been able to meet Li Bian, who had only three years previously usurped the throne of Wu, and in 937 established the Southern Tang. That Li Bian in this text is addressed with his posthumous title as emperor "Liezhu of the Southern Tang" thus is not surprising.

Furthermore Tan could then well meet and make the acquaintance of the following Southern Tang rulers as well. The date of his death reported in *Comprehensive Mirror on Successive Generations of Transcendents and Those Who Embody the Dao* also roughly corresponds with information found in Ma Ling's *History of the Southern Tang (Nan Tang shu)*, according to which he died shortly after the fall of Jinling to the Song armies in 976. I find it therefore appropriate to trust the *Comprehensive Mirror on Successive Generations of Transcendents and Those Who Embody the Dao* even though the age of Tan, - "more than hundred fifty years" -, definitely is exaggerated there.

As to Rao Dongtian, it would be very coincidental if the Rao Dongtian, who discovered the scriptures, would be different from the one who is a military official in the same region, almost eighty years earlier. The texts tell us that Rao (or Yao) held his post at a time, when Li Bian was prefect of Shengzhou. We know that Li was appointed to manage the affairs of Shengzhou in 908²¹, and relieved of his duties by his step-father in early 917.²² He first was sent to Runzhou as military training commissioner, a place he did not like, but one which moved him close to the capital of the state of Wu. The following year his step-brother who had acted as regent for the ruler of Wu was murdered in the capital. Li crossed the Yangzi with his troops, quelled the rebellion and was installed in Guangling.

²¹ *Jiu Wudai shi* 134.1785. The *Zizhi tongjian* lists this event under 909. See *Zizhi tongjian* (Beijing, 1992), 267.8708. I tend to rely on the older account because we know that Xuanzhou was seized by Chai Zaiyong in 908 and that it was right after that, that Li Bian was promoted to the position in Shengzhou. See *Xin Wudai shi* (Beijing, 1974), 62.765.

²² *Zizhi tongjian* 269.8815.

As to when Song actually met Li Bian we are enlightened through the *Yuhu qinghua*, which reports that Song became a follower of Li Bian, when he was prefect of Shengzhou.²³

From the various stories, anecdotes and biographical details we can conclude, that Rao Dongtian lived between 908-917 and that he recommended Song to Li Bian. Tan Zixiao at roughly the same time may have been active in Min under its first ruler Wang Shenzhi, as stated in the account in the *Comprehensive Mirror on Successive Generations of Transcendents and Those Who Embody the Dao* and become friends with Chen Shouyuan (?-939). Chen Shouyuan served at the court of Wang Yanjun (posthumous title Xianzong, r. 916-935), the first of the Min rulers to adopt the title emperor. Chen and three shamans seem to have encouraged Wang Yanjun to renounce the suzerainty of the northern dynasty (in that case the Later Tang) and acquire independence as an empire.²⁴

Lu You credits him with digging up the *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart Scriptures* that were said to have originated with the first Celestial Master Zhang Daoling (2nd cent. CE). The story, as Didier correctly remarks, is reminiscent of the Shen Tingrui story. The relevant part reads²⁵:

By digging in the earth [Chen Shouyuan] had received several tens of wooden tablets, that were contained in a copper vessel. [The wooden tablets] bore the amulet-seals of Zhang Daoling of the Han. Their vermilion and black colours [shone], as if they were new. He stored them but could not use them, so he gave them to Zixiao. Zixiao understood them completely and said consequently that he had acquired Daoling's *Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart*.²⁶

With the knowledge and power of the scriptures, Tan Zixiao was able to cure illnesses and exorcise demons which he proves in the case of He Jingzhu. He Jingzhu had killed his maid and her spirit haunted him so much, that he fell ill. So he asked Tan for help who was able to talk to the spirit and make it vanish. After that He Jingzhu recovered.

Two parallels exist between this text by Lu You and the story by Shen Tingrui. In both texts the scriptures are dug up, and in both instances Tan Zixiao is able to read or decipher them. So there is at least partial consistency, even though the locations are different, and the 'finders' of the text – Chen Shouyuan in Lu's text, Rao Dongtian in Shen's - vary.

Under the circumstances it is possible to consider the Correct Rites of the Celestial Heart as a cult which had its roots in southern China, in either Jiangxi or Fujian, and surmise that it evolved in the tenth century.

Conclusion

The text of the Tianxin zhengfa enjoyed great popularity which is evident in its inclusion in various imperial and private collections. Robert Hymes accepts the

²³ *Yuhu qinghua* 10.103.

²⁴ For this see Schafer, *The Empire*, 96-100.

²⁵ Didier did not translate this passage but paraphrased it.

²⁶ Lu You, *Nan Tang shu*, 17.71.

revelation of the Tianxin zhengfa as a major event in the religious history of the early Northern Song. As we have seen, the cult may have originated much earlier in the south. The appropriation of it under Northern Song auspices can be seen in the same light as that of other cultural features preserved especially under the Southern Tang. As I have explained elsewhere, especially the second Song emperor Taizong (r. 978-997), took advantage of what the Southern Tang had to offer in literary traditions, in material, and in manpower.²⁷ It is certainly no coincidence that the revelation of the Tianxin zhengfa in Song sources is identified with the reign of Taizong.

²⁷ Johannes L. Kurz, "The Politics of Collecting Knowledge: The Compilations Project of Song Taizong", in *T'oung Pao* 87.1:289-316 (2001).