Florian C. Reiter

The Taoism of Clarified Tenuity

清 微 道 法

Content and Intention

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Foreword

The Taoism of Clarified Tenuity 清微道法 emerged in the 13th century in Southern China, in the regions of Kiangsi and Fukien from where it widely spread. The Taoists understood to be expert at ritual and exorcist performances. They thought to act as representatives of Heavenly Masters Taoism 天師道, and in this capacity they were distinctly different from the meditative Taoism of Complete Integrity 全真 that in the same period of time developed in northern China, especially in Shandong province where the school established a Taoist monastic culture that did not focus on ritual services.

Representatives of Taoism of Clarified Tenuity acted as priests along the lines of Taoist rituals which mean the offering- and fasting-festivities 醮齋. They maintained and also further developed an exorcist culture that since antiquity constituted an exquisite track of Taoist professionalism. The exorcist side of the Taoist profession was always present. For example, when an offering was staged the location of the event had first to be cleared of demoniac influences. The official historians who described the imperial library of the Sui-dynasty had well understood the facts which the Literary Section of the Sui-History 隨書經籍志 proves. The Sui-History accommodates the entry about exorcism between explanations concerning offering- and fasting-festivities.

Whereas the Taoist rituals in the tao-arena 道場 are set to renew the bond between the world of man and the universe, the exorcist fa-arena 法場 is supposed to solve local and individual problems of the day like droughts, illness or other disasters that were attributed to demoniac possession or other evil influences. The exorcist rituals aimed to arrest and eliminate demons, deploying martial spirit forces, albeit not without requesting the consent from the highest divine authorities. Appropriate formal procedures were required, very much in the same way as required for other Taoist liturgical events.

Taoist canonical biographies show that since the early epochs of Taoist history the priests worked for all social classes, from peasant society up to the imperial court and administration. They showed competence as scholars and learned experts in ritual matters but they also mastered exorcist procedures. Unfortunately, concerning those early periods of Taoist history there is no documentation available as to detailed exorcist programs or the practical set up of exorcist rituals. We easily understand, however, that a vast variety of exorcist methods and ritual means met poular demand and
intended to justify the claim of competence which in the T’ang period, for example, the Taoist and scholar Chang Wan-fu 張萬福 (fl.711-713) formulated.

Concerning the practical means of exorcist rituals, the predominance of amulets and secret spells becomes readily evident. Sometimes we find the information that the Taoist priests and exorcists were also good at prognostication and other crafts that remind us of the culture of the masters of recipes 方士 of the Han epochs 前漢/後漢. Skills and culture of the masters of recipes seemed to thrive in the later Taoist religion, although skills and crafts 術數 like prognostication were considered as vulgar and less respectable occupation for a priest and ritual specialist 道士/法師.

The history of the official Taoist Canon 道藏 with Three Caves and Four Supporting Sections 三洞四輔 since the time of T’ang emperor Hsüan-tsung 玄宗 (8th ct.) shows that the compilers accepted imperial sponsorship. This dependence mattered greatly for the selection of the materials to be included in the Canon that the state distributed and presented to the major Taoist temples throughout the country. The Canon was an indispensable and almost holy asset in Taoist temples 道觀 and also was an obvious proof of the imperial interest in Taoism, which sources like The Beginning of the Subtle School of Taoism 妙門由起 and The Regulations for the Acceptance and Cultivation of Taoism according to the Tung-hsüan, Ling-pao, and San-tung Scriptures 洞玄靈寶三洞奉道科戒營始 illustrate.

A fine documentation concerning the meaning of having an imperially sanctioned Taoist Canon are the writings of the 43rd Heavenly Master Chang Yü-ch’u 張宇初 (1361-1410), notably his Ten Guidelines for the Taoists 道門十規 and some chapters in his collection Hsien-ch’üan chi 峴泉集. Chang Yü-ch’u started at imperial behest the compilation of the Canon that today is available as Cheng-t’ung Tao-tsang 正統道藏. We note the inscription by Ming-emperor Ying-tsung 英宗 dated 1445, that introduces the Canon showing a chart of the cosmic pantheon. The following inscription then indicates the position of the Canon in the harmonious, well administrated world of the empire, albeit without saying a word about Taoist priests and their doings.

It happened at this late stage in the history of the Canon that sources focussing on exorcist rituals could be incorporated. We have, however, to concede that we do not know the precise table of contents of the lost Yüan- and Sung-Canon. As to exorcist rituals, the extant materials in the Ming-Canon document a variety of traditions and transmissions that in the 11th
century started with T’an Tzu-hsiao 譚 紫 霄 (fl.936-976) and his disciple Jao Tung-t’ien 饒 洞 天 (fl.994) who established the Correct Rituals of the Heart of Heaven 天 心 正 法 in Kiangsi province which found continuation with Yüan Miao-tsung 袁 妙 宗 (fl. 1086-1116) as seen in his Secret Essentials Assisting the Country and Saving the People 太 上 助 國 救 民 總 真 祕 要, with Lu Shih-chung 路 時 中 (fl. 1107-1134), and Lin Ling-su 林 靈 素 (1076-1120). Lu Shih-chung had visualized Chao Sheng 趙 昇 who was a favourite disciple of Chang Tao-ling 張 道 陵, the first Heavenly Master in the Later Han-period. Chao Sheng reported to have stored secret texts at Mount Mao-shan 茅 山. Lu Shih-chung later got the chance to search for the texts and to find them. His new edition of the diverse materials is the canonical title: Great Rituals of the Jade Hall 無 上 玄 元 三 天 玉 堂 大 法, where we find documentation of notions that refer to Shang-ch’ing meditation, to funeral rites and to the exorcism of the Correct Rituals of the Heart of Heaven. The rituals of The Jade Hall are said to be the inner secrets of the Correct Rituals of the Heart of Heaven and the essential method of Chang Tao-ling.

The reference to funeral rites is noteworthy as Thunder Rituals in the Sung-period were dedicated to the world of the living 度 生/ 紅 事. The care for the dead 度 亡/ 白 事 seems to have seeped into the range of Taoist exorcism along different lines of operation which, for example, the priest and scholar Wang Wen-ch’ing 王 文 卿 (1093-1153) and his early followers had not realized in exorcist practise. It is remarkable that Chang Wan-fu (T’ang) in his statements concerning the tasks of Taoist ritual spoke only about issues of life in this world.

We notice that Chao Sheng played a legendary part in the divine career of the Thunder divinity Marshal Chao Kung-ming 超 元 帥 公 明 which was again designed to ascertain the accommodation of the exorcist proficiency within Heavenly Masters Taoism. Chao Sheng also is said to have initiated Lin Ling-su to Thunder Magic rituals. In a second mystic encounter he granted Lin Ling-su the titles Master of the Shen-hsiao Methods and Great Executioner for the Thunder Divinities.

The exorcist rituals and methods that were developed and documented under the label Heart of Heaven and Five Thunders rituals continued to develop and thrive, eventually under other titles and in different regional contexts stretching from Sichuan province to Fukien. We keep in mind that Wang Wen-ch’ing, Sa Shou-chien 薩 守 堅 and then the many early Taoists
of Clarified Tenuity Taoism 清 微 道 法 hailed from Sichuan, Kiangsi, and Fukien.

We must be aware of the fact that exorcist rituals originated in early epochs of Taoist history but since the Sung period onwards they were literally documented, enriched and grandly improved. The rituals altogether served those tasks that Chang Wang-fu many centuries earlier already had listed.

Around the time of the development of the Correct Rituals of the Heart of Heaven the court Taoist Wang Wen-ch‘ing described his handling of exorcism. He pointedly developed a rational, theoretical design that was based on current theories of internal alchemy 内 丹 that he applied to explain the inner workings of exorcism which was called Thunder Magic rituals 雷 法/ 五 雷 法. Wang Wen-ch‘ing saw himself competing with the Correct Rituals of the Heart of Heaven and claimed to address a wider range of divine Thunder forces that he identified with astral positions. Thunder forces of stellar dimensions were summoned to serve Thunder rituals that seemed to effectuate transcendent results and influences, and in this sense we use the word magic which does not mean miracles.

A special feature of the type of exorcism that the term Thunder Magic rituals describes was the focus on the personal quality of the priest 道 士/ 法 師 who would be entitled to perform Thunder exorcism. The Heavenly Master Chang Yü-ch‘u spoke about the San-tung tao-shih 三 洞 道 士 as being entitled to perform Thunder rituals. Wang Wen-ch‘ing informs us that the priest would have to transform ritually into an individual Thunder divinity, adopting the divinity as alter-ego. In a second step then he could unite his inner Thunder divinity, his alter-ego with the cosmic body of the same Thunder divinity.

The priest would use techniques of internal alchemy to achieve the transformation of his own being. This procedure constitutes the spiritual and ritual might to communicate with the sphere of the divine and to perform as exorcist. It is amazing how those abstract and elusive theories of internal alchemy become a clear-cut operational option of religious impact if we follow the works of Wang Wen-ch‘ing and his follower Sa Shou-chien (fl. 12th ct.).

The realization of Thunder Magic rituals was an independent, individual performance, for example in residential quarters to heal illness. Thunder Magic rituals were performed in the countryside at pools and ditches where amulets on iron tables or bricks were submerged in order to stir up rain dragons to end droughts or to expel water monsters and secure country paths,
just to mention a few applications. Speaking about amulets we have to emphasize that the Thunder amulet was the most important ritual device. Thunder amulets often were large and complicated graphic designs that looked like images of fierce, soaring, and armed bird-men in combination with ritual characters. We perceive fast strokes of the writing brush that may end in huge black dots where secret names and spells were kept safe under black ink. The amulets are usually described in their dissolved form which means that each part of the graphic design is individually presented together with short spells of a descriptive nature, explaining which spiritual meaning the respective part exactly stands for. The priest had to learn by heart all the information, and when doing the amulet he would put that religious content into the amulet. The production of a Thunder amulet was a ritual in its own right.

When Wang Wen-ch’ing once expelled fox spirits from the palace compound of emperor Sung Hui-tsung 宋 徽 宗 (r.1100-1126). He established a Thunder altar, performed his ritual and finally had the fox-spirits enter a jar that he covered with an amulet. He buried the jar in the ground which caused the earth to tremble. The problem was solved, and Wang Wen-ch’ing being a priest of Heavenly Masters Taoism set up a traditional chiao-offering 醮 to thank heaven. This story features how the action was reported to have happened.

Summarizing essential aspects of Thunder Magic rituals as they had been described in sources of the Sung-period and later were partly continued in Taoism of Clarified Tenuity we can say:

1) A correspondence between inner and outer phenomena (inner rain/physical outer rain) is assumed. The Taoist operates accordingly in terms of internal alchemy and applies formal, literal procedures like dispatching memoranda.

2) The priest of Heavenly Masters Taoism uses a Thunder register to transform into a specific Thunder divinity as individual alter-ego.

3) Amulets and spells express and transport the spiritual might of the priest.

4) Thunder rituals intend a final destruction and extermination. The extermination of demoniac forces should be based on divine approval. Exorcism that harms people or is performed without divine approval will boomerang.

5) The personal integrity of the priest is the precondition for any exorcist success.

6) Thunder amulets are the key exorcist tools in Thunder rituals that are singular, independent events. The structure of these rituals is open to
variations and/or omissions. In some cases we have to put up with a sloppy and incomplete transmission in the **Canon**.

7) Thunder rituals may be good enough to serve a large range of tasks, or they are specialized to solve specific tasks like the expulsion of insects and reptiles.

8) In some cases Thunder rituals are performed with the support of professional mediums. The performing Taoist priest does certainly not turn into a medium.

9) There is a clear divide between Thunder rituals and shaman practices that are explicitly rejected.

Concerning the basic set up of the rituals, the canonical documents give the following description. First there is an individual pantheon: (a) **Ritual Patrons** 主 法; (b) **Marshal Class** 師 旅; (c) **General Class** 將 部. Various texts follow suit e.g.: **Summoning and Uniting** 合 召; **Spells**. The main bulk of the so-called **Great Rituals** 大 法 are **amulets**, often in combination with spells. Indications of the ways and means of production and application are seldom.

The **Ritual Patrons** are the overlords of the ritual, the spiritual guarantors and witnesses that the performing priest will first address or visualize. The **Marshal Class** and **General Class** inform about the divine vis-à-vis that the priest will transform into to perform the ritual after **Summoning and Uniting** subordinate martial spirit forces. The magic, divine potential that the priest called upon to be present at the altar will be invested in the writing of amulets and their application.

Perusing the important canonical sources, especially the collection **A Corpus of Taoist Rituals** 道 法 會 元 of the 14th/15th centuries we find it striking how much the extant exorcist **Great Rituals** differ in length and content. We never know whether the presentation is complete or not. For example, we may find that the entry **Ritual Patrons** is missing, which could mean that a practitioner simply calls on his own, familiar **spiritual patrons** that are good enough as overlords for the ritual in consideration. It may also be the case that the application of the respective **Great Ritual** is barred from application by the non-initiated person. Of course, it also may be the case that the indication was skipped, and the **Ritual Patrons** of the preceding **Great Rituals** should be called. We never can exclude that we are working with a deficient edition. This is the condition of the materials in **A Corpus of Taoist Rituals** and other sources that we study if we want to describe **Content and Intention of Taoism of Clarified Tenuity**.
In fact, what we featured so far, referring to Thunder Magic rituals turns out again in the wide field of Taoism of Clarified Tenuity. The Taoists of the new school that evolved in Fukien in the late 13th century claimed to unify the totality of religious Taoism. The historical schools like Shang-ch’ing 上清, Ling-pao 靈寶 and Tao-te 道 德 were seen as expressions of Tao 道 and Fa 法 of Clarified Tenuity 清 微 which allegedly had emerged from the abysses of pre-history and constituted the very beginning of Taoism.

The later historical schools and branches were phenomena that suited the time until the female genius Tsu Shu 祖 舒 reunited them in the T’ang period. History then dragged on again concealing Clarified Tenuity until Huang Shun-shen 黃 舜 申 in the late 13th century fixed and unified the body of Taoism, and so Taoism of Clarified Tenuity entered undisguised the stage of history. We already remarked that Taoism of Clarified Tenuity claimed to represent Taoism as a whole which naturally included the established forms of Taoist ritual that the terms Tao-arena 道 場 and Ritual/exorcist arena 法 場 identify.

In fact the biographical sources of the early representatives of Taoism of Clarified Tenuity speak about the ability to command Thunders and thunderclaps which implies the knowledge and realisation of Thunder Magic traditions. It was even claimed that the name Taoism of the Divine Empyrean 神 雷, meaning Thunder Magic rituals 雷 法 was an alternative name for Taoism of Clarified Tenuity.

We understand that exorcist methods are very much the main concern in Taoism of Clarified Tenuity. Indeed, there are many aspects of continuity concerning the range and ritual tasks of Sung Thunder Magic. We also see an evident continuity in the selection of the magic amulet as the decisive ritual tool. The nine points that characterise Sung Thunder Magic rituals as listed above are mirrored in Taoism of Clarified Tenuity. We observe, however, that they were mellowed down and partly even abandoned. The high aspirations and standards that Sung Taoists displayed speaking about the ritual transformation into a divinity 變 神 or the ritual composition of Thunder amulets 雷 符 were rarely sustained.

We understand that quite a few Great Rituals had come down from epochs of Taoist history before the Sung period and continued to be in use as methods of Taoism of Clarified Tenuity. Exactly the same Great Rituals can turn up in different parts of the collection A Corpus of Taoist Rituals and accord then with the style of the new branch: Taoism of Clarified Tenuity. How do we detect the adaptation?
We find such an adaptation if the deified ancestors of *Clarified Tenuity* appear on the position: *Ritual Patrons*, namely first of all Tsu Shu, called Tsu yüan-chün 祖元君. We may find on the second and third positions Wei Hua-ts’un 魏華存, representing the *Taoism of Highest Clarity* 上清 and Chang Tao-ling 張道陵, the first Heavenly Master. The amulets of these *Great Rituals* are almost exclusively in the style of antique seal characters. There are no more any amulets showing fierce bird-men. The amulets of *Clarified Tenuity* remind us of the true writs of antiquity, and we sense the attempt to return to expressions of the glorious past. We suppose that the attempt was made to live up to some literary standard which may have helped the Taoists of *Clarified Tenuity* in the early Ming-period to work for the imperial administration. The adaptation and integration of *Great Rituals* that originated in Sung *Thunder Magic* into the sphere of the new school may be advertised through adding the two words *Clarified Tenuity* 清微 to the original title which is, of course, a rather modest effort.

Amulets are often called *scriptures* that present a set of seal characters, either with or without transliteration. Sometimes even a single character may be called *scripture*. These amulets can be burnt at the altar during a chiao-offering or a *chai*-fasting festivity. They were used to enrich traditional Taoist rituals, which is a very specific feature that we hardly find in Sung *Thunder Magic* rituals. On the other hand, Sung *Thunder Magic* and Yüan/Ming *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity* share the use of especially installed altars where the spirit generals were supposed to appear, ready to receive orders. There are many chapters in *A Corpus of Taoist Rituals* that feature styles of memoranda and other ritual paper work which was needed for ritual and exorcist performances. A rather late document in *A Corpus of Taoist Rituals* is *The Jade Rules of the Heavenly Altars* 太上天壇玉搘 that show the possible combination of traditional liturgical provisions or ranks with exorcist rituals.

Outstanding representatives of *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity* and of the older *Thunder Magic rituals* presented essays concerning the theoretical basis of the exorcist profession that always was seen within the frame of Heavenly Masters Taoism, and in this sense Lin Ling-su, Wang Wen-ch’ing, and Sa Shou-chien were very productive scholars. Li Shao-wei 李少微 and Chao I-chen 趙宜真, for example, were also productive authors who wrote in favour of *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity*. The Taoist and scholar Po Yü-ch’an 白玉蟾 (fl. 12th ct.) lived well before the time of the historic *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity*, and yet, he had formulated some theories and notions
that perfectly suited the new branch of exorcist proficiency. *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity* adopted some of his writings as welcome support.

The expositions of Po Yü-ch´an deal largely with the desired personal standard of the priest who would have to realize a professional quality that elevates him far beyond the shaman or the medium. Various discourses written by the other authors discuss sensible topics like the transformation into a divinity and the composition of amulets. The discourses reveal the tendency to abandon complicated formal procedures and internal spiritual processes or practices for which the *internal alchemy* of the Sung period had originally provided the theory and rhetoric.

Throughout the ages there is the unbroken reality of the common and unchangeable tasks that the priest and exorcist in Chinese society had to cope with. The need to have rain fall or to push back inundations, to overcome the trouble of being infested by malignant demoniac forces united the Chinese agrarian society, and the Taoist was the person to meet the challenge. Naturally, in the course of history and throughout the different regions diverse traditions of exorcist proficiency developed which often were connected with specific divine patrons and religious traditions.

Wang Wen-ch´ing promoted the cult of the three Thunder divinities: Teng Po-wen 鄧伯溫, Chang Yüan-po 張元伯, and Hsin Han-ch´en 辛漢臣. Teng Po-wen was the *Great Divinity of Blazing Fire* and the head of the group. Ritual texts associated with Wang Wen-ch´ing have the three divinities turn out to be a trio. However, there are also *Great Rituals* that have Teng Po-wen, Chang Yüan-po and Hsin Han-ch´en acting alone as *Ritual Patron* or key *marshal* which suggests that a vast dissemination of the cults had occurred in different regions.

Po Yü-ch´an declares in his chart *Lineage* 世系 that Yü-kuang 鬱光, the second son of T´ai-hao 太昊 is identical with *Blazing Fire*, Marshal Teng [Po-wen]. Chang Yüan-po is said to be identical with Chih Shou-ming 摯收明, the first son of Fu-feng Hei-li 扶風黑歷. Hsin Han-ch´en is identical with Hua Han-chi 華漢極 who is the second son of Lung Yen 隆延. They are said to be the posterity of the emperors Ti-k´u 帝嚳 and Huang-ti 黃帝, with T´ai-hao 太昊 at the absolute beginning of the clan history. They are the family that constitutes the root of Chinese cultivation. Therefore, the cult of the three Thunder marshals must have been a matter of general interest for well educated and informed persons as the cult was perfectly embedded in the overall setting of Chinese culture.

The *Canon* presents various genealogies of divinities and immortals that allegedly mirror the development and structure of Taoism from its very
beginning at the moment when the cosmos evolved, up to the time of the 13th century and all of this is called *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity*. The most detailed canonical title is *The Chronology of the Immortals of Clarified Tenuity* (14th ct.).

We are not surprised to find the above mentioned trio Teng Po-wen, Chang Yüan-po, and Hsin Han-ch’en in texts of the new branch, for example in the collection *Great Rituals of the Manifestation of Origin in [the Heaven] of Clarified Tenuity* (14th ct.). We can find rituals of Sung *Thunder Magic* that were adopted and adapted to *Clarified Tenuity*, like the cults of the Thunder marshals Chao Kung-ming 趙公明 and Ma Sheng 马 勝. Ma Sheng appears in several traditions of *Thunder Magic rituals* and is paired with other martial charges, namely Ch’ en Ta-nien 陳 大 年 and Chu Seng-ch’i 朱 僧 奇. Ma Sheng occasionally also operates alone, and so he does in some rituals of *Clarified Tenuity*.

A characteristic feature of the *Great Rituals in Taoism of Clarified Tenuity* is the many references to *chiao-*醮 and *chai-*齋 festivities. Specific seal-character amulets were at such events burnt in the incense burner while the priest was reciting spells. And yet, exorcist rituals that were completely independent of the performance of *chiao-* and *chai-*festivities can be documented very well, which resembles the wide range of operation in Sung *Thunder Magic rituals*.

We know that representatives of *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity* contributed to the final compilation of the Ming-Canon and assume that they also had a hand in the compilation of *A Corpus of Taoist Rituals* containing 268 chapters. Chapters 1-55 hold the bulk of texts of the new Taoist branch. We select representative texts that describe the underlying, common theoretical notions and also the practical approaches, which we use to feature the content and intention of *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity*.

The book does not present a history of *Taoism of Clarified Tenuity*. Such a study would have to take into account regional history from Sichuan province down to Fukien, and cover a period of about three hundred years which is beyond the purpose of this book.

I wish to thank my colleagues at Fu-jen University and National Taiwan Chengchi University in Taipei for the great help and the friendly unceasing support that I could enjoy all the time. I especially thank the Centre for Chinese Studies and the National Library in Taipei for the kind permission to use the facilities of the institution during all these years.