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Fourth-Century Daoist Family: The Zhen'gao, or  
Declarations of the Perfected, volume 1

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*A Fourth-Century Daoist Family: The Zhen'gao, or Declarations of the Perfected, Volume 1*, by Stephen R. Bokenkamp. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. xi, 216 pp. US\$85.00 (cloth), US\$85.00 (ebook).

*Zhen'gao* 真誥 (*Declarations of the Perfected*) is the product of a singular meeting of minds. Its co-authors were the spirit medium Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–ca. 386); the mostly female divinities of the Shangqing 上清 (Upper Clarity) pantheon whose voices Yang purported to record; Yang's patron, the Eastern Jin court official Xu Mi 許謐 (303–373?); and Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), the erudite editor of the Yang-Xu manuscript legacy. The resulting collection features flights of visionary inspiration as well as passages of enigmatic obscurity that befit their origin in the most exalted sphere of esoteric Daoism. Stephen Bokenkamp's fearless undertaking of a complete translation, reorganization, and annotation of Tao Hongjing's compilation will progressively make available to Western readers a treasure house of Daoist medieval literature that inspired generations of adepts and poets.

No one is better qualified for the task than Bokenkamp. A second-generation disciple of Shangqing literature, he has dedicated a lifetime to the study of the textual traditions and religious culture surrounding the *Declarations*. His teachers Edward Schafer and Michel Strickmann, to whom the volume is dedicated, were respectively pioneers in the fields of Shangqing poetry, a genre with antecedents in the ancient shamanistic *Songs of the South* (*Chuci* 楚辭), and of the Maoshan 茅山 revelations that were at the origin of the Shangqing corpus. Other relevant works preceding *A Fourth-Century Daoist Family* include Strickmann's masterful studies on the social and intellectual world of Tao Hongjing and Isabelle Robinet's complete scriptural survey of the Shangqing canon. The only other translations of the *Declarations* on a scale comparable to Stephen Bokenkamp's undertaking are the Japanese collaborative *Shinkō kenkyū* 真誥研究 and a less scholarly, ongoing rendition into English by Thomas Smith.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Yoshikawa Tadao 吉川忠夫 and Mugitani Kunio 麥谷邦夫, eds., *Shinkō kenkyū (yakuchū hen)* 真誥研究 (譯注篇) (Kyōto: Kyōto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 2000); Thomas E. Smith, *Declarations of the Perfected, Part One:*

A *Fourth-Century Daoist Family* is the first instalment of a projected multi-volume work. It contains the translator's introduction, including an important differentiation between the overlapping mediumistic, shamanistic, and prophetic qualities of the Shangqing revelations, and four chapters of items regrouped from different parts of the *Declarations*. Tao Hongjing confessed that he was often at a loss to reconstruct the original order of the texts at his disposal. Moreover, the rationale for his classification led him to divide thematically related fragments into separate sections. The vicissitudes of the *Declarations'* later transmission further added to the disarray. Bokenkamp's choice to reorganize the material according to criteria that speak to modern readers is laudable and will contribute significantly to the work's appreciation. To guide the reader through the maze of fragments and annotations, Bokenkamp designed a multi-layered organization comprising translations of the original text fragments embedded in Tao Hongjing's commentaries and editorial notes, the translator's introductions to chapters and groups of poems, supplementary comments by the translator set off in a different font, and footnotes elucidating obscure passages and allusions.

What motivated Tao Hongjing to compile the *Declarations*? The answer to this question is found in his postface, an important document that Michel Strickmann also discussed and partially translated. Bokenkamp helpfully places it at the head of the present volume, where it constitutes the whole of chapter 1. In this postface, Tao explains his criteria for classifying the material and the reasoning that induced him to divide it into seven parts: (1) selection of the human medium for transmitting a revelation; (2) divine validation of the medium's worthiness; (3) self-cultivation techniques; (4) sacred geography; (5) the pantheon and divine retribution; (6) personal communications between Yang Xi, Xu Mi, and Xu Mi's son Xu Hui 許翺; and (7) lineages and biographies of the visiting divinities. This arrangement suggests that what drew

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*Setting Scripts and Images into Motion* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2013); and Smith, *Declarations of the Perfected, Part Two: Instructions on Shaping Destiny* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2020).

Tao to the Xu family legacy was the light the manuscripts shed on the wellsprings of spirit-human interaction, the topography and administration of the invisible world, and the workings of retributive justice.

Beside the lives of the divine and human agents in the divulgation, the postface also lays out the manuscripts' transmission history. The Shangqing revelations were from the beginning shrouded in mystery. Yang Xi was a family medium. The prominent Xu clan of Jurong 句容 county near Maoshan consulted him on the afterlife fate of their deceased relatives and the causes of retributions that family members suffered in this life. An inspired calligrapher and visionary, Yang "actualized," that is, saw in his mind, the visiting goddesses who orally imparted to him the poems and other pronouncements they intended for his patron. These he recorded in his own hand and transmitted to Xu Mi. Xu collected and recopied the manuscripts, practiced their instructions on self-cultivation, and preciously safeguarded the documents entrusted to his care. Nevertheless, during the lapse of more than a century between the revelations in the 360s and Tao Hongjing's editorial work on them in the latter part of the fifth century, enthusiasts and traffickers acquired the coveted manuscripts and disseminated them pell-mell, causing the texts' dispersal and compromising their integrity. This moved Tao to undertake his critical compilation of the surviving fragments.

The remaining three chapters in *A Fourth-Century Daoist Family* can be summarized as follows: "Poems of Elühua (鵲綠華)" translates and discusses three poems bestowed by the banished female transcendent of that name, not on Yang Xi, but on a palace official named Yang Quan 羊權. The ambiguous nature of their shamanistic encounter would prompt Daoist poets of the Tang to transform it into one of romantic attachment. "The Sons of Sima Yu" is a short series of pronouncements by three goddesses, including two ladies from the court of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母), predicting that Sima Yu 司馬昱 (320–372), the future Emperor Jianwen of the Eastern Jin, would have male offspring if he faithfully followed the instructions of the Perfected. Sima's circle entertained close relations with the Xu family, who

provided the prince with such prognostications. The last chapter, “Eight Pages of Lined Text,” reassembles diverse passages that originally derived from a single document: poems on the suitability of Xu Mi for a spirit marriage; an account of the famous dream of the Eastern Han Emperor Mingdi (r. 57–75) announcing the arrival of Buddhism in China; a description of the mythical isles of Fangzhu 方諸 in the Eastern Sea; and a collection of sayings of the gods of Fangzhu drawn from the Buddhist *Scripture in Forty-Two Sections* (*Sishier zhang jing* 四十二章經). Although Tao Hongjing’s personal inclinations were evenly divided between the two religions, the Fangzhu materials suggest that the *Declarations of the Perfected* also incorporated texts belonging to the period’s apologetic literature that declared Daoist revelation to be at the origin of Buddhist scriptures, if not of Buddhism itself.

As a work of literature, Bokenkamp places *Declarations of the Perfected* in a class with the *Divine Comedy*: “Both works deliver compelling visions of bright celestial realms and dark underworld regions; both present a political perspective on the important figures of their respective societies; both feature love portrayed as holy and ethereal; and both helped remake the literature to come through pushing the boundaries of poetry” (2). In the absence of a central cosmological plan and sustained narrative in the *Declarations*, the comparison is difficult to substantiate. Beatrice was a human being endowed with intelligence of the divine (as distinct from divine intelligence) whom Dante, in the tradition of the Troubadour poets, amorously placed on a pedestal. To assimilate the nature of the guidance and inspiration Dante ascribed to Beatrice with shamanistic marriage and the pronouncements of goddesses in the *Declarations* would seem a stretch. As regards literary innovation, the rapturous poetry of Shangqing, engendered by a courtly society in communion with its celestial counterpart, undeniably had a following in both religious and secular literary circles. But again, Tao Hongjing’s restoration of a legacy that relied on recondite language and swore its initiates to secrecy is difficult to correlate with Dante’s renewal of Italian literature through the avant-garde use of a vigorous vernacular.

This reviewer's impression is, rather, that for Tao Hongjing the literary excellence of the revelations mattered as a touchstone of authenticity: "[Yang Xi's] writing was not something that could be brought about by human artifice alone," he wrote (49). Living in the age of canon formation, Tao worked in an intellectual environment where Daoists and Buddhists competed to perfect bibliographic and philological methods that would enable them to unassailably distinguish authentic from fabricated, canonical from apocryphal. Bokenkamp demonstrates the painstaking scholarship that Tao Hongjing deployed in his textual criticism, constructing a framework of historicity to lend the pronouncements authority, documenting their transmission with forensic exactitude, analyzing turns of phrases, calligraphic styles, and writing techniques, while neglecting neither ink nor paper. The *bona fide* transmission of a text from a divine source ensured its authenticity, that is, efficacy; in *Declarations of the Perfected*, the Medium is the Message.

Thanks to Stephen Bokenkamp's translation, noninitiates and comparatists will now be able to debate such questions. With this first volume, he has embarked on a journey that promises to present Western anthropologists of religion with a source book on spirit mediumism unrivaled in wealth and interest. In China, mind travel and medium divination reach back to antiquity and forward to this day, touching every sphere of society from popular religion to the imperial cult. The task of sorting out the traces of the Shangqing revelations continues. Tao Hongjing took a disparaging view of the masters Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 and Gu Huan 顧歡, who preceded him but looked forward to a future "studious person with an outstanding allotment" to carry on his work (77). For our time, that person has been found.

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