

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Jakub Otčenášek
"Time and Bureaucracy in the Cosmologies of Early Tianshidao (2nd-5th century"

**Submitted in 2019 at the [Univerzita Karlova Filozofická fakulta,
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I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The dissertation analyzes an array of texts that are considered as the early sources of the Daoist *Tianshidao* (Heavenly Masters or Celestial Masters) with focus on the different cosmologies reflecting different cultural bias expressed in them. The author employs cultural theory and the group/grid typology as developed in the social sciences by Mary Douglas as analytical methodology for an interpretation of the texts with special focus on their use of bureaucratic imagery and their conceptions of time in the context of different types of millennialism. The author achieves thereby to present the nuances of variations and divergences within the texts that are commonly counted under the movement of the Heavenly Masters, which then allows him to critically assess current conceptions of the development of Chinese religion.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation¹

The dissertation proposes an analysis of several Daoist texts from the early medieval period. The strength of this dissertation lies in the introduction of the methodology of Cultural Theory from social sciences to the study of Daoist texts. Focusing on cosmologies expressed in the texts allows the author to interpret coherently also in absence of concrete information of the social and historical background of these texts, and it also allows him to speculate and construct possible scenarios of this missing social background. This is an innovative approach, which proves to be useful and effective to demonstrate and explain the many divergences within Daoist texts commonly considered to belong to a "Heavenly Master" (Tianshidao) "church."

The dissertation thus brings important new analytical tools and perspectives to the current debate of the history of Daoism and Tianshidao in particular, where the view that the Daoist religion starts with the Tianshidao, which is conceived as a "church" – which then develops throughout the middle ages (Kleeman 2016, also e.g. Kobayashi 1990) is opposed by a view that Daoism should be understood as different communities of practice (e.g. Raz 2012).

While the author does not seem to take sides with regard to this question (see e.g. p. 23, §4), he does show convincingly that in terms of cosmologies and cultural bias we can find many nuances and divergences in texts that others simply classify as representing one "church", and that these divergences cannot be all explained by a teleological vision of the development of religion. He draws important conclusions by contextualizing his analyses within a larger field of studies of Chinese religions, in particular the recent work of Lagerfeld et al 2015.

In this regard the achievement of the dissertation is noteworthy and important.

In terms of formal execution there is space for improvement, details will be given below. The formal problems should definitely be fixed before publication, however they should not be seen

¹ Note that all references to texts refer to the bibliography of the dissertation in question and abbreviations are used following the dissertation's usage as well.

as detracting too much from the merit of the dissertation, namely to give a detailed nuanced analysis of the differences in terms of cosmologies and worldviews expressed in texts that are commonly cited as belonging to or representative of a movement that is interpreted as “church”. The dissertation offers much detailed materials for a reconsideration of our current narratives of the development of Daoism after the Han, including also a complete translation of one important and so far untranslated early text, namely the *Zhengyi tianshi gao Zhao Sheng koujue* (DZ 1273) (chapter 11.3).

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

Overall, the analyses presented are convincing, and the methodological tool of interpreting texts with a focus on cosmologies following Mary Douglas grid/group typologies opens a very interesting path for a re-evaluation of the current narratives of “what is Daoism”, or “what is Chinese religion.”

The Introduction presents the dissertation chapter by chapter with a short summary.

The second chapter introduces the question of bureaucratic imagery (2.1), based on secondary scholarly literature and with a special emphasis of the interconnectedness of bureaucracy and religion in China. The description is coherent and based on the most relevant studies. The following section on Hegel (2.2 – 2.4), while per se coherently argued, does superimpose an extra interpretational concept and layer to the general discussion of a historical development. The application of the dialectic model of thesis, antithesis and synthesis as a structuring device to explain developments especially in times of crisis seems useful if heuristic – however, it could, in this reviewer’s opinion, be used as a logical device detached from the rather notorious views on China Hegel (which could have been dealt with in a footnote for example), which do not contribute to the analyses here. Some of the points outlined here, like the overlap of religion and state and the concept of a teleological development towards a rationalization reappear in the dissertation in the conclusion, but without further elaboration on the connection to Hegelian thought.

The third chapter offers a mildly critical engagement with Kleeman’s narrative of the movement of Tianshidao, a very short description of an alternative narrative proposed by Raz 2012 (3.2), and a tentative arrangement of Kleeman’s narrative in terms of the development of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (3.3.) followed by a – necessary and relevant – critical reflection on this approach (3.4). 3.5 then introduces under the title “comparing cosmologies” the main methodology of the dissertation, namely Mary Douglas grid/group typologies, including specific adjustments made for the scope of the dissertation. It should be noted that the key term “cosmologies” which is used frequently also before, has not been defined explicitly so far. Apart from this lacunae, the method is explained clearly and coherently.

Chapter 4 introduces the key concept of time representations and millennialism. Here the author goes well beyond the previous scholarly discussions of millennialism in Daoism in his analysis. Introducing Mary Douglas’ application of group/grid analysis not only proves a useful tool for a differentiated analysis, it also offers a possibility to put the theory

(developed in *Natural Symbols*) to test in a different environment, namely Tianshidao.

4.3 then introduces the different repertoires of time representation, categorizing them according a scheme developed by Hartog 2003. In the first sections the conceptions of different authors of primary sources are presented following mainly the secondary literature without citations of the primary literature (see e.g. p. 45-46). The chapters “Symbolic separation” and “the third element” offer particularly insightful and convincing discussions, and the following sections offer a more detailed analysis of source materials including also Chinese texts and their translations, which is to be commended.

After these first chapters have thus laid the groundwork in terms of concepts and methodology, the actual analysis of texts, mostly of texts in translation, begins:

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of early Heavenly Masters institutions, following largely Kleeman. Here we find a close reading of the Zhang Pu Stele (5.2), and a description of the early Tianshidao institutions according to the texts listed in the beginning of the chapter. This is then summarized in the conclusion with additional focus on bureaucratic imagery and millennialism.

Chapter 6 deals with the Xiang'er commentary to the Laozi, and presents an interesting and convincing analysis of this text (cited from Bokenkamp's 1997 translation) and its cosmologies, which suggest that the previously assumed connection of the text to the Hanzhong institutions should be reconsidered.

Chapter 7 analyzes the *Yangping parish* and the *Commands and Precepts*, both datable to the 3rd century and a 4th century poem *Tianshi jiao*, (translated respectively by Kleeman 2016, Bokenkamp 1997, Kleeman 2016), chapter 8 analyzes the *Scripture of the Yellow Court*, and compares it with the *Central Scripture*, again, as the other texts treated, with a view to their cosmologies.

Chapter 9 focuses not on a text but on the ritual of merging the pneumas, as an institution of initiation and the way it is described in three different texts, namely the *Yellow book*, the *Transition Ritual* and the *Demon Statutes* (to be discussed in detail in the next chapter). This chapter – which deals admittedly with a rather difficult bc not too well documented subject – is rather weak, there is neither grid/group typology analysis nor any concrete time representation analysis, one wonders therefore why this was included here as a separate chapter instead of a subsection or introductory section of the following chapter 10, which deals with the *Demon Statutes* and begins by stating that this text is the earliest known which mentions the 3-5 and 3-5-7-9 associated with the sexual rites of merging the pneumas, explicitly. Chapter 10 then discusses, coherent with the chapters on specific texts before, the cosmology of the text, and in particular different forms of millennialism.

Chapter 11 presents a text in complete translation, the *Secret instructions*. This text is particularly interesting because of its representation of time. Since the text was so far not translated, this is a very valuable contribution also in terms of making new sources available. The analysis with a focus on time representation in prophecies is convincing and of interest. It also opens up a new path to look at the relations of the Shangqing texts to texts as the one analyzed (p. 113), which is interesting also for a wider discussion of Daoist texts beyond those of the Tianshidao tradition.

Chapter 12 presents an analysis of two texts that deal with precepts: *The Scripture of Precepts and Codes taught by the Celestial Master and Canonical Statutes of the Most High Lord Lao*. Also here the author presents several excerpts in Chinese and an original

translation, which is to be commended. The analysis, which is built comparing the two texts, is convincing.

Chapter 13 presents under the title “New Orthodoxies” three texts, *The Inner Explanations* (translated in Bokenkamp 1997) and Kou Qianzhi’s *Intoned Precepts* and Lu Xiujing’s *Abridgements of the Daoist Code* (transl. by Nickerson 1996) from the north and south respectively, resulting in a very complex chapter with three separate conclusions. Each text’s analysis is preceded by a short contextualization. While the analysis focusing on transformation and time concepts is coherent, the last section on Lu Xiujing’s abridged code seems shaky: In this reviewer’s opinion the question to whom exactly Lu was talking, and the possibility that he was talking to competing Daoists would need to be considered there. The section could have also profited from more quotations of the text itself.

The Conclusion, chapter 14, summarizes the results of the study concisely, and argues for a more nuanced understanding of the different texts acclaimed to belong to Tianshidao, in order to appreciate also their considerable differences in worldview. Two subchapters deal with the question of bureaucratic imagery (14.1) and the question of millennialism (14.2).

Somewhat surprisingly for this reviewer, the author does not go back to the different narratives of “what is Daoism”, introduced in ch. 3. and the role and nature of Tianshidao therein – a question to which the dissertation actually contributes much – but prefers to contextualize his findings in the larger field of study of Chinese religion.

He takes issue (in 14.2) with a recent important publication on religions in China (Lagerwey et al 2015) and the approach of understanding religions as entities tending towards a systematization through social change (p. 161), expressed in the sequence of rationalization, secularization, interiorization. Relating this theory to the findings of the dissertation and the application of the group/grid typology in the analysis of cosmologies, the author finds that the analysis of texts provided shows that this interpretation of the development of religions is not really supported by the findings of the dissertation. Even if some texts show a development of systematic cosmologies, these should not be reduced to ideologies supporting the dominant institutional order (p. 161). With regard to millennialism, which generally goes against the values of rationalization, secularization and interiorization, the author argues that millennialist cosmologies should not be seen as short lived deviances or irrationalities, but they actually contribute with a vision of radical change to social arrangements that may persist or be periodically reproduced (p. 162).

There is in terms of structure a certain disconnect between the introduction, the analysis, and the conclusion, mainly because the author chose to engage with Lagerwey instead of Kleeman and Raz (both presented in chapter 3). It is clear that the dissertation is much indebted to Kleeman’s previous work, however, especially with a view to the fact that Kleeman’s narrative of the development of Tianshidao, and the underlying assumption (first expressed by Kleeman’s teacher Strickman) that all Daoism should be considered in relation to Tianshidao, is discussed rather controversially (e.g. Espeset 2016), a detailed critical contextualization of the results of the analyses of the texts in Kleeman’s narrative would have been useful for the field of Daoist studies, but is not really addressed. However, the engagement with Lagerwey’s theory is lucidly argued and presents an excellent critical point with regard to current conceptions of the development of Chinese religions.

2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

Formally the dissertation is acceptable, however there are some oversights and inconsistencies:

Several authors are mentioned in the text but not listed in the bibliography: e.g. Vervoon 1990, Ikeda 1981, Katz 2009, Crespigny 1980 and 1976 (the bibliography lists Crespigny 1957 and 2008), Ostrander 1982, Pokora 1971, Eich 2015, Petersen 1989-1990, Kobayashi 1996 (p. 105, note 105), while the bibliography lists only works from 1990 and 1995.

The in-text citations at times offer the page number, oftentimes they don't, see e.g. page 42, 55 (Raz 2010 and Pregadio 2005 might both have needed a more precise reference). In some cases citation is completely missing (e.g. p. 44, "cold societies" described by Levi-Strauss as....; p. 14: ...described by Mori Mikisaburo in 1943 (no mention in bibliography); p. 34, note 27 should have had a page reference, among others.

P.61, 4) "Commands and Admonitions (*Luxiansheng daomen kelüe* 陸先生道門科略, 255)" should presumably rather be "*Commands and Precepts*" (as listed in the Abbreviations for the *Dadao jialing jie* which is usually dated to 255). Bokenkamp 1997 translated Admonitions, Kleeman 2016 translated Precepts). *Lu Xiansheng daomen kelüe* does not seem to belong there at all.

It remains unclear why Kleeman 2016 is cited as *Masters* and Bokenkamp 1997 as *Scriptures* (even though it is explicitly announced), while all other authors are cited with the author/date system. This leads to some confusion for the reader, because apart from Kleeman 2016 and Bokenkamp 1997, only the Chinese source texts are cited with short title abbreviations.

The language of the dissertation is grammatically correct and overall orthographically correct as well. The dissertation is visually well presented and graphically well formatted. The TOC is clearly structured as well.

3. *Use of sources and/or material*

The author uses an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, including the most relevant Japanese and Chinese publications on the subject. Apart from the issues listed above under point 2, the author works transparently with the secondary sources and the primary sources.

There is at times a certain imbalance in the use of source texts: in some chapters (e.g. 4.1 and 4.2) we find references to Chinese authors and primary sources cited from the secondary literature without supporting examples from the primary sources at all, in other sections, like 4.3 we find original texts and translations cited to support the arguments. Since chapter 4 intends mainly to provide conceptual background, the lack of supporting citations in some parts is acceptable.

The analytical chapters (5-13) show a similar imbalance, switching from close reading strategies (e.g. 5.2 and chapters 6, 10, 11, 12.1) to descriptive and summarizing narratives (e.g. 5.3, chapter 7, 8 and 13) without much citation of primary source texts other than their names and various key terms. Considering that most potential readers are most probably not familiar with the texts, some more supportive material from the original texts would have been desirable in the sections.

4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

The dissertation brings an innovative approach to the study of early medieval Daoist texts, in as much it adapts a social science theory systematically for the analysis of texts. Instead of focusing on the social experience – which is problematic given the scarcity of information on concrete social context of most of the texts considered – the author analyzes the cultural bias expressed in the cosmologies of the texts. With this method he is able to show differences and divergences within a range of texts that have been predominantly, and in particular in Terry Kleeman’s recent (2016) publication, assumed to belong to one organized “church”. The presentation of the Heavenly Masters as an institutionalized “church” is much debated (see e.g. Espeset 2016), however, the view on the other end of the spectrum, namely that Daoist communities existed with no commonalities as separate entities, leaves scholars with difficulties to explain the persistence of references for example to Zhang Daoling or to the Heavenly Masters in the sources. Using the analysis of cultural bias in the various texts, the author achieves a “middle ground” for his interpretation, allowing for the connectedness and communalities of an assumed institution of the Heavenly Masters as well as for the many divergences within these texts. This should be seen as an original, very useful, needed, and innovative contribution to the field of Daoist studies.

IV. **Questions for the author**

➔ As you know, Kleeman’s (and Strickman’s) thesis that Tianshidao should be considered as the “core” of Daoism, or else, that all Daoists recognize Zhang Daoling and his revelation or the TSD institutions, is debated. While you emphasize that you are not arguing against Kleeman’s theories, the results of your research still do seem to propose that maybe the story of Daoism could also be narrated in a different way. How would you position the results of your dissertation in the context of for example the critique of Espeset in his 2016 review of Kleeman’s work? Or in the context of the difference between Raz’s and Kleeman’s narratives mentioned in chapter 3?

➔ Since the dissertation is about Tianshidao, the strict limitation to texts that claim or show a relation to Tianshidao, is of course a sensible one. However – there are many other early medieval Daoist texts, most notably those of the Jiangnan tradition, which at least in some cases, e.g. the *Durenjing* (DZ 1, main scripture of the Lingbao tradition) or the *Dadong zhenjing* (上清大洞真經 DZ 6, according to Isabelle Robinet in Shipper/Verellen 2004, 1043, the closest to the original Shangqing version of the *Dadong zhenjing*) do not mention neither Zhang Daoling, nor the term *Tianshi* (Heavenly Master), nor the term *chongmin* (seed people) or similar references to Tianshidao lore at all.

The question of time and millennialism as well as the bureaucratic imagery appear as far as I can judge also in those texts.

To what extent do you think the model of analysis you employ here for Tianshidao related texts could be usefully expanded to include also texts that do not immediately refer to the Tianshidao tradition?

- ➔ Do you think your methodology might be maybe also able to produce new models of categorization of Daoist texts along the lines of types of millennialism and the use of bureaucratic imagery as defining elements rather than the current conceptions of divisions along “doctrinal” or “lineage/sectarian” lines?
- ➔ You speak on page 123 and 164 of the religious market of their times. Assuming the existence of a “religious market”, we might also assume competing groups with competing texts. Strickmann’s (1977) and Bokenkamp’s (1983) seminal studies on the development of the Shangqing and Lingbao scriptural corpora have argued both for a background of competing groups in the respective traditions. Your model of interpretation and analysis focuses on the attitude towards a dominant culture and towards institutions of Tianshidao. However, you also compare the texts among each other, noting convergences and divergences. One example is chapter 8, the comparison of the *Yellow Court* and the *Central Scripture*. Among all the texts you have studied – are there instances where you would think that the texts relate to each other in a way that it can be also shown on the linguistic level as e.g. text and counter-text, or are the different or similar cosmologies developed separately, with no references to the other texts we have? You give some indications when discussing the question of the reactions to failed prophecy (11.2), among others. Can you elaborate on that?

V. Conclusion

The dissertation presents a noteworthy original contribution to the field of Daoist studies.

The author has developed and consistently applied a methodology based on cultural theory to coherently analyze cosmologies in different texts. The focus on cosmologies offers a new perspective for the study of these early medieval texts. The results of the analyses offer an important contribution to our understanding of the texts of the Tianshidao, and they allow also to critically question current conceptualizations of the development of Chinese religion.

Furthermore the dissertation presents with the translation of a hitherto untranslated text in chapter 11 a contribution to the material base of texts available in translation for the study of early medieval Daoism.

While some minor oversights and inconsistencies on the formal level exist, the dissertation meets the standards customarily required of a doctoral dissertation, and I recommend the dissertation for public defense.

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

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(Friederike Assandri)