

Daoist Modes of Perception: “Registering” the Living Manifestations of Sire Thunder, and Why Zhuang Zi is Relevant

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Abstract

The present article investigates different representations of Sire Thunder (雷公 Lei Gong), classifying them according to the particular modes of viewing—“registering”—they exemplify. My analysis involves Tang dynasty (“literary”) stories, hagiographic materials, Daoist ritual manuals from the Ming, and some visual representations of modern provenance. Taken together, they will allow me to bring to light a theory about a repertoire of differentiation that I would like to characterize as Daoist “modes of perception.” I argue that different perspectives for viewing Sire Thunder (as an outlandish demon, as a registered god, and as a cosmic entity that inheres throughout the bodily micro-cosmos) express a hierarchical understanding of his ritual transformation from an individual and lowly spirit to a force that can be ritually called forth from the cosmic “realities” latent with the human body. Much of my analysis is developed in dialogue

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with the Phenomenology of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus—but this dialogue is unthinkable without the theories articulated in the classical writings of Zhuang Zi.

Keywords: Sire Thunder, Zhuang Zi, Perception, representation, subject-object distinction, mindful body

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