Background

The academic study of sacred texts is dominated by a concern for the roles that print and media play in producing and transmitting religious meaning. Many of these studies focus on how technologies like the printing press, television, and the Internet have revolutionized the reproduction of sacred texts. Analyses of handwritten manuscripts, by comparison, have not garnered much attention aside from large caches of texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. This book foregrounds the manuscript cultures of Daoism, in part because the copying, editing, and rewriting of handwritten texts was and continues to be a vital part of the Daoist religion. Even today, an aspiring Daoist adept must copy by hand his or her master's scriptures, liturgies, and talismans. Copying these texts serves as a kind of initiation for the disciple, a constituent part of what it means to "be(come) a Daoist."

In religious Daoism, thousands of scriptures circulate at one time, and there can be many different versions of each of these texts. During the medieval era, a scripture was imagined as a text spontaneously appearing in the heavens many eons before humans existed. Starting in the second century CE, when religious Daoism first appeared in China, celestial beings revealed these scriptures through spirit mediums. In some cases, two or more mediums might receive different versions of a scripture. For scholars, these variations are signs of copying, editing, and even stealing earlier editions. But in early medieval China, this phenomenon was explained as the product of the imprecise nature of the "translation" of scriptures from heavenly script

into a mundane one (i.e., classical Chinese). Human language was incapable of fully expressing a text's celestial original. Furthermore, celestial beings transmitted long scriptures to mediums in bits and pieces. A scripture was sometimes first recorded in small units that were later collated together.[1] The title of our book, *A Library of Clouds,* refers to this cache of heavenly texts transmitted in a jigsaw fashion.

The translation of Daoist scriptures from a celestial script into classical Chinese was rarely a process that happened from start to finish at one time. A celestial being might only reveal parts of text; they would then reappear days, months, or even decades later to transmit new parts of texts. During these séances, a medium could also request celestial beings to clarify and explain earlier revelations. New layers would be added to the old text, even if authors of two passages disagreed. Subsequently, Daoist scriptures rarely emerged as one continuous, seamless narrative, but rather as disjointed and uneven texts. But these signs of conflicting voices do not mean that Daoist writers were confused. On the contrary, the different layers of a text reflect an ongoing conversation between the Daoist pantheon and human mediums. The ongoing editing and rewriting of Daoist scriptures also led us to choose the book's title. In addition to describing the lofty origins of Daoist scriptures, *A Library of Clouds* describes its accretive formation. A Daoist text can (and often does) change just like billowing clouds in the sky.

In order to explore the writing and transmission of Daoist scriptures, our book focuses on a manuscript tradition that arose in fourth- and fifth-century China called the Upper Clarity (*Shangqing* 上清) order.[2] The first Upper Clarity Daoists lived near Maoshan 茅山, a chain of mountains east of present-day Nanjing. Their texts were produced during private séances led by Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–386 CE). Yang was a medium who worked on behalf of his aristocratic sponsor, Xu Mi 許謐 (303–376 CE), as well as Xu's family and friends.[3] Between 364 and 370, Yang claimed to have made contact with the Perfected (*zhenren* 真人), celestial beings who revealed scriptures on a daily basis.

Much of the scholarship on Upper Clarity scriptures tries to uncover which extant texts are "original" or "authentic" Yang Xi productions. While

these studies have made immense contributions to Daoist studies, the endeavor has been fraught with difficulties. First, we do not have paper manuscripts of this period or anything prior to the fourteenth century. Most redactions of the Upper Clarity scriptures exist only in late imperial collectanea, such as the fifteenth-century *Zhengtong Daoist Canon,* and are distant refractions of what may or may not have been the original text.[4] Second, many of these scriptures have been altered, edited, and changed over the centuries. It was common for later mediums to receive new revelations and change a previous manuscript. A single scripture may have multiple authors who wrote parts of a scripture in different times and places. As mentioned above, it was common for mediums not to erase older revelations, thus making a Daoist scripture a pastiche of differing (and sometimes conflicting) ideas rather than a unified thought.

Distinguishing the "original" Upper Clarity scriptures of Yang Xi has often resulted in the neglect of scriptures written by subsequent generations of mediums. While some scriptures might not have been revealed to Yang Xi, they went on to become influential and well known in later centuries. A great example of these latter revealed texts is a group of three scriptures called the Three Wonders (*sanqi* 三奇). Versions of three scriptures circulated between the fourth and sixth centuries, and by the seventh century they were among the most prized and esoteric Daoist scriptures in China. The Three Wonders typically refer to the following texts:

1. *Perfected Scripture of the Great Grotto in Thirty-Nine Stanzas* (*Dadong zhenjing sanshijiu zhang* 大洞真經三十九章, hereafter the *Scripture of the Great Grotto*)
2. *Precious Scripture on the Five Ancient Lords, Jade Seal of the Feminine One* (*Ciyi yujian wulao baojing* 雌一玉檢五老寶經, hereafter *Jade Seal of the Feminine One*)
3. *Most High Wondrous Scripture of the Immaculate Numen* [*Celestial Palace*] *and Penetrating Mystery of the Great Existence* [*Heaven*] (*Taishang suling dongxuan dayou miaojing* 太上素靈洞玄大有妙經, hereafter *Scripture of the Immaculate Numen*)

There has been very little written about the Three Wonders in any language. Isabelle Robinet's 1984 study on Upper Clarity Daoism demonstrates that the terminology and rituals of the Three Wonders resonate with Yang Xi's original revelations. But Robinet rightfully saw inconsistencies within the Three Wonders, particularly in 2 and 3 above, that made them different from other Upper Clarity scriptures. The Three Wonders, for instance, do not appear in the scriptural catalogues and bibliographies extant in the *Zhengtong Daoist Canon.* If these texts were so significant for the Upper Clarity tradition, writes Robinet, why would Yang Xi rarely mention them? Robinet concludes that the Three Wonders were later creations, even "forgeries":

> All these texts [featuring the Three Wonders] were added or integrated into the Upper Clarity corpus as an afterthought, yet assumed a form and adopted a terminology that are exactly those of the other writings of the [Upper Clarity] school. The content of the scriptures (e.g., visual meditations, spells, alchemical recipes, invocations) is in perfect harmony with the other texts of the movement. The general themes are the same. This is why they cannot be separated from the rest of the writings of Upper Clarity; they are clearly part of the same group of writings, even if sometimes some details contradict each other and it is clear that these texts are later forgeries.[5]

Later in her study, Robinet provides painstakingly detailed comparisons ("Recoupements et emprunts") of the content of the so-called forgeries with the other "authentic" Upper Clarity scriptures. Through her meticulous study of the scriptures, she proposes that the Three Wonders represent not one but many editorial revisions. The various layers of the texts, according to Robinet, leaves us with scriptures that are "incomplete and ha[ve] undergone interpolations."[6] She concludes that the conflicting and fragmentary qualities of the Three Wonders illustrate that they are "apocryphal" and that "many of the passages are interpolated."[7]

To call the Three Wonders "forgeries" or "apocryphal" suggests that the Three Wonders are in conflict with a group of "authentic" texts. Given the accretive formation of Daoist scriptures described above, however, we find

it helpful to delve deeper into the Three Wonders to get a better sense of mediums in Upper Clarity circles who copied, edited, and rewrote books.

At the heart of our study is the third of the Three Wonders, the *Scripture of the Immaculate Numen.* Since Robinet has already provided a thick description of the contents of the scripture, we build on her study in two ways. First, we provide an annotated translation of the scripture, which will make the study of its contents accessible to a larger audience. Second, the five chapters of part 1 of this book explain how the Three Wonders and the *Scripture of the Immaculate Numen* came into existence among early readers of Upper Clarity texts. Through analysis of contemporary bibliographies, hagiographies, and commentaries, we maintain that many of the ideas of the Three Wonders as "forgeries" are, in fact, rooted in the ideas of medieval exegetes who championed one version of Upper Clarity over another. At the end of this book, we propose that one individual responsible for many of these new texts is Wang Lingqi 王靈期, who was later criticized for his rewriting of Upper Clarity texts in the early fifth century.[8] A study of the Three Wonders will offer insights into the persons and institutions who reformulated these texts and offer insights into what they reflect about the changing norms and expectations of Daoists in this early period.

Our comparison of different Daoist scriptures moves beyond *what* readers borrowed from such and such a text. We seek to understand *how* readers accessed, [re]interpreted, and used scriptures. Taking cues from historians of the book, we study how readers interacted, consumed, and reproduced texts to shed light on the overlapping activities of reading and writing. We are struck by how the producers of medieval Daoist texts resemble the readers in early modern Europe, who also would:

> read in fits and starts and jump from book to book. They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs.[9]

The readers and writers of Upper Clarity scriptures likewise would jump from book to book, break texts into fragments, and assemble them into new patterns. The composers of these texts simultaneously played the role of "author" and "reader" by actively reinterpreting texts, not by passively receiving them.[10] Whereas previous studies of the Three Wonders have ignored these scriptures because of a heavy editorial imprint, we argue that these qualities actually offer tremendous insight into the transmission of early Daoist manuscript cultures.

We see our study as situated in a larger stream of studies in comparative religions. The scribal activities in our book have many parallels with early Christian scribes during this same period. Scholarship on these traditions has been particularly helpful in articulating the social networks in which these manuscripts were embedded. Kim Haines-Eitzen's studies of religious manuscripts and private scribal networks have helped us consider how literature was reproduced and disseminated.[11] She argues that a different kind of methodology is needed to determine the precise circumstances, modes, and contexts of transmission. Examining the social history of Christian scribes, she looks at various kinds of evidence (e.g., copies of text, quotations, mentions of text, colophons, request for texts) to consider the channels or social networks behind transmission.

Focusing on the network around scriptural manuscript production helps us understand the copying of these texts as a phenomenon similar but different from the ways scriptures are "published" today.[12] Daoist adepts, after all, were not the only writers repackaging written texts in medieval times. Buddhists in this same period created pastiches of passages, remarks, and other texts already in circulation as anthologies, compilations, or heavily redacted versions of texts.[13] Much of these developments were due to the rise of paper as the dominant material for manuscripts in the early centuries of the Common Era. Whereas previous technologies like bamboo and silk had made text production cumbersome or expensive, paper manuscripts allowed an increased circulation of books and expansion of libraries, both imperial and private.[14]

Just as Daoists were copying and rearranging fragments in their scrip-

tures, analogous kinds of book production existed in China. It was common for patrons to hire copyists who would call from a variety of sources; rarely was a book copied cover to cover.[15] In fact, leading religious figures of medieval China often held top positions at imperial libraries such as Garden of the Floriate Grove (*Hualinyuan* 華林園), where books were copied, anthologized, and remade.[16] It is our hope that this book will kindle interest in the Daoist canon as one of the principal sources for book history in China. For students of Daoism, our study of the *Scripture of the Immaculate Numen* offers new direction for studying scriptures with a complicated bibliographic history.