

Series Editors' Preface

Daoist studies is a relatively young field of study. The earliest modern publications date only to the 1930s, following the publication of the Daoist canon in Shanghai. Outside of China, studies of Daoism as a religion began in the 1940s in France and Japan and only reached the United States in the closing years of the 1970s. The subject of this book, the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, is an early Daoist work that came to form the central text of and give its name to one of the three *dong* 洞, or “comprehensive collections,” into which the first Daoist canon was divided in the fifth century. Despite the proscription of the text that Dominic Steavu discusses in the opening pages of his engaging study, the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* survived down to the Ming version of 1445 and still defines the first of the three *dong*. It is thus an important work for the history of Daoism, but its study has been greatly overlooked. To draw a parallel from research into Christian texts, it is as if one of the three gospels had yet to attract scholarly attention. Steavu's book is the first monograph devoted to the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns'* contents and history.

Perhaps because the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* was so poorly known, the origins and contents of this section of the canon have been the subject of controversy and speculation since the 1940s. The writing of this book, on this topic, is thus an act of scholarly courage. It is also an undertaking that requires extraordinary erudition. While Daoism is one of the most recent fields subjected to scholarly purview, the resulting “land rush” has been

gaining in momentum. Steavu here sets out to fill one of the most glaring lacunae in the burgeoning field of Daoist studies, but there are a number of works in Chinese, Japanese, and French that precede him. He deals with these—none of which has succeeded in bringing order to the scattered fragments of this important textual tradition—fully and judiciously.

Among the new findings Steavu presents here, the following are perhaps the most innovative and thought-provoking:

1) He argues that the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* testifies to elements of southern practice that were fundamental to the foundation of the three divisions of Daoism. The *Writ* provided a distinct set of basic practices and understandings to the compilers of the other two divisions of the canon, the *Shangqing* and *Lingbao*. These include the use of political metaphor to structure ritual, the deployment of talismans and charts, and meditative practice based on visualization;

2) He puts forth a vision of talismans, charts, and elixirs—the products of alchemical practice heretofore understood as drugs and representatives of a process to be observed—as part of the same constellation of powerful objects. These objects point beyond themselves to the potent cosmological forces and powers that they represent;

3) He demonstrates some of the ways by which a localized tradition, through its manipulation of culturally important spiritual and political symbols, can provide the structural foundation for practices that were developed to replace it. This localized tradition, then, became the primary bearer of the political uses of Daoism. Here Steavu explores to good effect an aspect of Daoism that intensely interested Seidel, who noted of Daoists that “their very creed was based on a revelation homologous with the manifestation of the Mandate of Heaven [and] their priests were empowered by objects homologous with the auspicious portents legitimizing Chinese sovereignty.” This aspect of the *Writ*, Steavu concludes, was so central to its message that it led to its partial proscription in 648.

In these and other ways, this book marks a major step forward in the field of Daoist studies. Steavu has brought order to a fragmentary and scattered body of material that was poorly understood before now. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his work.