



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The heavenly court: a study on the Iconopraxis of Daoist temple painting
Gesterkamp, L.

Citation

Gesterkamp, L. (2008, March 5). *The heavenly court: a study on the Iconopraxis of Daoist temple painting*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12632>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12632>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

THE HEAVENLY COURT

A Study on the Iconopraxis of Daoist Temple Painting

Lennert Gesterkamp

PhD Dissertation

Leiden University

The Heavenly Court: A Study on the Iconopraxis of Daoist Temple Painting

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van Rector Magnificus prof.mr. P.F. van der Heijden,

volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties

te verdedigen op woensdag 5 maart 2008

klokke 15:00 uur

door

Lennert Gesterkamp

geboren te Oosterhout (NB)

in 1971

Promotor:

Prof.dr. B.J. ter Haar

Referent:

Prof.dr. E.Y. Wang (Harvard University)

Leden Promotiecommissie:

Prof.dr. R.L. Falkenburg

Prof.dr. J.A. Silk

Dr. O.J. Moore

Deze promotie is mogelijk gemaakt door een beurs van de Hulsewé-Wazniewski Stichting (HWS) ter bevordering van onderwijs en onderzoek aan de Universiteit Leiden op het gebied van de archeologie, kunst en materiële cultuur van China.

Abstract

The Heavenly Court

A Study on the Iconopraxis of Daoist Temple Painting

Lennert Gesterkamp

For more than two thousand years, the Chinese have imagined paradise as an imperial court situated in heaven where celestial officials, similar to their terrestrial counterparts, govern and decide over the affairs of the human world. The traditional Chinese name for paintings depicting this Heavenly Court, *chaoyuan tu* 朝元圖 (“paintings of an audience with the origin”), reveals the close link with the core element of Daoist liturgy, the *chao* 朝-audience ritual, which consists of addressing deities with written memorials in a visualised heavenly court audience. The wall paintings found in the main ritual hall of a Daoist temple complex or the hanging scroll-paintings on an open-air altar exactly depict this heavenly court audience, and the paintings are therefore a visual representation of the practice of the *chao*-audience ritual. This focus on viewing images as a representation of practice rather than for example style, symbolic meaning, language, or social relationships, is a methodology I have devised and termed iconopraxis.

This study investigates the iconopraxis of four complete sets of Heavenly Court paintings – the Yongle gong murals, the so-called Toronto murals in the Royal Ontario Museum, the Nan’an murals, and the Beiyue miao murals – all wall paintings dating to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and aims to explain how Daoist ritual and related practices inform the particular layout and representation of these Heavenly Court painting.

After a historical survey outlining the development of Heavenly Court painting from the fifth century to the present and providing an inventory of extant materials and related sources on these images, I demonstrate in the first chapter that Daoist Heavenly Court paintings are an elaboration on a traditional, indigenous theme in Chinese pictorial art, the *chao*-audience theme. Before the emergence of the first Heavenly Court paintings and sculptures in the fifth century, the same format is witnessed in the so-called homage scenes of the Later Han dynasty in the second century AD, in Buddhist donor scenes, and in tomb

procession scenes. I argue that these various scenes are in fact different representations of the same practice of the *chao*-audience ritual. The *chao*-audience theme, primarily because the *chao*-audience ritual also formed the main element of Daoist liturgy, was then adopted in the depiction of Daoist Heavenly Court paintings.

In the second chapter, I demarcate the ritual foundations of Heavenly Court paintings that provided the conceptual framework on which painters based their composition. The conceptual framework consists of a left-right division (i.e. east and west) on the walls of a temple hall; an arrangement in three tiers of an altar mound and the so-called Six Curtains; a division into the Three Realms of Heaven, Earth and Water; a Northwest-Southeast axis; and an arrangement of the Eight Trigrams.

The third chapter deals with practical matters of murals production, explaining how the social organisation and working procedures of the wall painters in early modern China determined the design of a Heavenly Court painting. The use of preparatory drawings in the design of Heavenly Court, of which several examples have survived, demonstrates the close overlap between design and the construction of a ritual area with hanging-scroll paintings, resulting in either a loose, joined, or integrated design which in turn provides potent clues on the quality of the painting workshop and eventually on the price of a Heavenly Court painting.

The fourth and final chapter explains how Heavenly Court paintings are “personalised” to fit the wishes of the patrons, accounting for many of the irregularities and differences among the four versions under discussion. The personalisations of the patrons, chiefly Daoist priests or the religious community as a whole, pertain to the inclusion of irregular deities or portraits or semi-historical figures, or to the conscious adoption of a particular ritual format linking the site to a certain liturgical tradition. Such personalisations have invariably distinct political connotations and reflect the interests of the religious community on a local level or the high-minded ideals and aspirations of the Daoist patrons on a more national level.

Lastly, a conclusion summaries the most important results of the study and provides suggestions for future research. The appendix contains a discussion of the historical background and a detailed iconographical analysis of the four Heavenly Court paintings of this study.