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The Netherlands

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

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Introduction

A Daoist Heavenly Court painting, in Chinese often referred to as a *chaoyuan tu* 朝元圖,¹ is a representation of Daoist paradise and visualised as a court audience of celestial officials governing over the human world of affairs. The theme of the court audience (*chao* 朝) exists since at least the second century AD in Chinese pictorial art and the Daoist Heavenly Court is an elaboration of this theme that probably emerged in the fifth century. Although sculpted versions also exist, the theme figures mainly as paintings decorating a Daoist ritual area, thus found either as wall paintings in the main hall of a Daoist temple complex or as hanging scroll paintings surrounding a Daoist altar. The close connection between the composition, contents and representation of a Heavenly Court painting on the one hand, and the ritual area and Daoist liturgy, which central act also consists of a court audience (also called *chao* 朝) but in a court in heaven, on the other poses us for a range of questions on the relationship and interplay between the two and on the way painters and patrons operated in this creative process and how they influenced its outcome. In order to answer these questions, I will advance a new methodology for viewing and investigating images, a methodology which I call iconopraxis and which sees an image as a representation of an accustomed practice, in our case the practice of the *chao*-audience ritual.

This study will focus on four sets of Heavenly Court paintings from four different temples, but which are, or were, all located in northern China and datable to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries:

1. Yongle Gong (Palace of Eternal Joy) 永樂宮, located in Ruicheng 芮城, southwestern Shanxi 山西 province; dated by inscription to 1325.

¹ *chaoyuan tu* 朝元圖 literally means “painting of an audience with the origin” and is the standard term to designate this type of painting in modern Chinese sources. However, many variations with *chao* or “audience ritual” exist in traditional sources to designate the same type of painting, another common term is for example *chaozhen tu* 朝真圖 or “painting of an audience with truth.” In these various terms, the *chao* is the defining element and I have therefore opted for the more general translation of “Heavenly Court” because of this divine imperial court’s location in heaven rather than on earth.

2. The so-called Toronto murals, originally from a unknown location in the Pingyang 平陽 area in central Shanxi province but now on display in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto; datable to the first half of the thirteenth century.
3. Nan An 南安 (Southern Hermitage), located in Yaoxian 耀縣, central Shaanxi 陝西 province; datable to the late Yuan dynasty (1260-1368).
4. Beiyue Miao (Northern Peak Temple) 北嶽廟, located in Quyang 曲陽, central Hebei 河北 province; datable to 1270.

For a detailed discussion of the history, scholarship, iconography and layout of these four sets of wall paintings as well as for questions on their date and original location, I refer to Appendix 1. Other known representations of the Heavenly Court, in stone and in hanging scroll paintings and mostly dating from other periods, will serve as supplementary material.

In this introduction I will further elaborate on the state of the field with regard to the study of temple painting and that of Daoist art which both constitute rather new disciplines in Chinese art history, and present a theoretical foundation for my methodology of iconopraxis.

Temple painting

Temple painting, i.e. wall paintings in temples in contrast to those in caves or tombs, is a largely understudied subject in Chinese art history, and its research is still in a very early stage.

Relatively few temple paintings survive and most of them date to the last six hundred years. Although data are lacking on the precise number of temple paintings in China, a general survey conducted on my side would suggest that hardly none survive from the pre-1000 period, about two dozen for the period up to 1400, another hundred or so from 1400 to 1600, and several hundreds after that until 1900.² These temple paintings are generally found in North China, such as the provinces Hebei, Shanxi, and Shaanxi, where they have survived mainly for climatological reasons; the timber frame buildings that house the wall paintings survive better in the dry north than in the humid south. This is of course not to say that South China had no tradition in wall painting. Most of these have simple not withstood the test of time.

The present situation is however not representative for the past, because it is certain that before 1900 the number of temple paintings was far greater than at the present moment.

² These estimates are based on numbers of temple paintings mentioned in Chai Zejun 柴澤君, *Shanxi siguan bihua* 山西寺觀壁畫. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1997, and Wang Hui 王輝, “Hebei sheng xianzai siguan bihua de fenbu yu tici 河北省現在寺觀的分佈 與題材.” *Wenwu chunqiu* 文物春秋 6 (2006), pp. 37-42, and references to temple paintings in other sources or personal investigations in the field.

The small number of extant temple paintings, beside climatological reasons, can almost entirely be attributed to the political vicissitudes of the twentieth century, first the state policy of “destroying temples in order to build schools” (*pomiao banxue* 破廟辦學) from 1900 to 1937, then the Second World War with Japan, and after 1949 the anti-religious policies of the Communist Party and the Cultural Revolution. According to estimates made in recent research, around 1900 China still counted about one million temples; one hundred years later, only a few thousands temples have left.³ Although not all temples, a considerable amount of these temples would have had wall paintings. With a drop of almost one hundred percent, this means that Chinese temple culture has almost been completely extinguished in the twentieth century, and with it a Chinese temple painting tradition going back at least two thousand years.⁴

In China, research on temple painting began in the second half of the twentieth century, mostly in tandem with the preservation and renovation projects on temples that were initiated in that period, leading to the publication of numerous articles in Chinese journals and a series of luxurious, large-size picture albums.⁵ The Yongle gong is probably the most publicised temple in this respect. Its “discovery” on the northern riverbank of the Yellow River in southern Shanxi province, its relocation and rebuilding brick-for-brick in Ruicheng, the three halls with sumptuous murals - making it the temple with the largest surface of murals in

³ Vincent Goossaert, “Le destin de la religion chinoise au 20^{ème} siècle.” *Social Compass* 50.4 (2003), pp. 429-440; and idem, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800-1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 62-66.

⁴ The earliest textual references to temple paintings date to the Han dynasty, such as the religious wall paintings at the Palace of Sweet Spring ordered by Emperor Wu of the Han (r. 147-87 BC). See *Shi ji* 史記, by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-86 BC). Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1994, j. 12, p. 458. See also Jin Weinuo 金維諾, “Qin Han shidai de bihua 秦漢時代的壁畫.” *Wenwu* 文物 1 (1980), pp. 15-21; Jin Weinuo 金維諾, “Zhongguo gudai siguan bihua.” *Zhongguo meishu quanji* 中國美術全集, *Huihua bian* 繪畫編 13, *Siguan bihua* 寺觀壁畫. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988, pp. 1-40; and Jin Weinuo 金維諾, “Siyuan bihua de kaocha yu yanjiu 寺院壁畫的考察與研究.” *Wenwu* 文物 4 (1998), pp. 39-52.

⁵ For the large photo-albums, see for example the Shanxi sheng wenwu guanli gongzuo weiyuanhui 山西省文物管理工作委員會 (ed.), *Yongle gong* 永樂宮. Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1964; Beijing shi Fahai si wenwu baoguan suo 北京市法海寺文物保管所 (ed.), *Fahai si bihua* 法海寺壁畫. Beijing: Zhongguo luyou chubanshe, 1993; Chai, *Shanxi siguan bihua*; Jin Weinuo 金維諾 (ed.), *Yongle gong bihua quanji* 永樂宮壁畫全集. Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 1997; Jin Weinuo 金維諾 (ed.), *Zhongguo diantang bihua quanji* 中國殿堂壁畫全集, Vol. 3, *Yuandai daoguan* 元代道觀. Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1997; Kang Dianfeng 康殿峰 (ed.), *Pilu si qun hua* 毗盧寺群畫. Shijiazhuang: Hebei meishu chubanshe, 1998. Recently, also many temple paintings have been reproduced in series of less expensive photo-albums or booklets, for example in the series of *Zhongguo siguan bihua dianzang* 中國寺觀壁畫典藏 edited by Jin Weinuo and published in 2000-2001, and in *Lishi siguan bihua yishu* 歷史寺觀壁畫藝術, edited by Pin Feng 品豐 and Su Qing 蘇慶 published in 2000. Numerous small articles have appeared in *Wenwu* 文物 and in provincial journals on cultural relics and archaeology over the last few decades, the most relevant of which will be dealt with later in this study.

China -, is all well documented.⁶ The Nan'an and Beiyue miao murals are much less well known, and the Beiyue miao murals still have not been published beside some small, very mediocre photographs. Many temples, mostly from the Ming and Qing dynasties however have remained unstudied and unpublished, and only in recent years these temples begin to attract some scholarly attention, albeit it only in China.

The situation of the study of Chinese temple paintings in the West has a different history. In the first half of the twentieth century, a small selection of the temple paintings was sold to art dealers, or cut from their walls by Japanese soldiers, and eventually ended up in North American museums, where they became the subject of some avid western scholarship.⁷ This scholarship was however was mainly focused on their provenance, dating, painters, and iconography. Among these temple paintings, the set of Heavenly Court paintings in the Royal Ontario Museum are among the most published and discussed temple paintings in western scholarship. Despite the publication of the Yongle gong murals, which sparked some interest among western art historians, particularly because they were dated, signed and from the same period and the same Shanxi area as many of the temple paintings in the North American museums, western scholarship has thus far not been able to integrate temple painting in the discourse of Chinese painting history.⁸

The main reason for the seeming lack of interest on the part of the western scholar for Chinese temple paintings is their inaccessibility. Many of the surviving temple paintings are located in remote areas – a feature also contributing to their survival – which have for a long time been closed to foreigners. It is only after the relaxation of the anti-religious policies

⁶ The eighth *Wenwu* issue of 1963 was dedicated in its entirety to the history, architecture, and wall paintings of the Yongle gong. Much additional information can be found in the modern local gazetteer of Ruicheng where the Yongle gong was rebuilt, Ruicheng xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 芮城縣誌編纂委員會 (ed.), *Ruicheng xianzhi* 芮城縣志. Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 1994.

⁷ William C. White, *Chinese Temple Frescoes: A Study of Three Wall-paintings of the Thirteenth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1940; Nancy Steinhart, "Zhu Haogu Reconsidered: A New Date for the ROM Painting and the Southern Shanxi Buddhist-Daoist Style." *Artibus Asiae* 48 (1987), pp. 5-38; Ka Bo Tsang, "Further Observations on the Yuan Wall Painter Zhu Haogu and the Relationship of the Chunyang Hall Wall Paintings to 'The Maitreya Paradise' at the ROM." *Artibus Asiae* 52 (1992), pp. 94-118; Michelle Baldwin, "Monumental Wall Paintings of the Assembly of the Buddha From Shanxi Province: Historiography, Iconography, Three Styles, and a New Chronology." *Artibus Asiae* 54 (1994), pp. 241-267; and Marilyn Gridley, "Images from Shanxi of Tejaprabha's Paradise." *Archives of Asian Art* 51 (1998-1999), pp. 7-15. Anning Jing wrote a PhD dissertation on the Yongle gong Heavenly Court, Anning Jing, "Yongle Palace: The Transformation of the Daoist Pantheon During the Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368)." PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1994.

⁸ One of the earliest publications on temple painting in the west was Laurence Sickman, "Wall-Paintings of the Yuan Period in Kuang-sheng-Ssu, Shansi." *Revue des arts asiatiques* 2.2 (1937), pp. 53-67. One of the most recent contributions in the west, on the same temple paintings, is Anning Jing, *The Water God's Temple of the Guangsheng Monastery: Cosmic Function of Art, Ritual, & Theater*. Leiden: Brill, 2002. For a review of this work, see my critical appraisal in *T'oung Pao* 90.4-5 (2004), pp. 459-467.

under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980's, which was also the period when many temples were renovated and turned into museums, that the temples became accessible to the general public.

Another possible reason for the little enthusiasm generated by Chinese temple painting among western (and Chinese) scholars may be the traditional, biased Chinese view on painting, which they undeliberately incorporated in their writings. This view differentiates between “literati painting” (*wenren hua* 文人畫) and “professional painting” (*gongren hua*). Because temple paintings are done by workshop painters on commission it was automatically classified as “professional painting” and therefore inferior to “literati painting,” which was considered individualistic and self-expressive.⁹ This distinction came only into being with the rise of a literati-class in the Song dynasty (960-1279), and because our main sources on painting are written by these literati, it is no surprise to find that from the mid-Song onward, hardly any information is found on temple painting or their painters, who thus have been tacitly deleted from the written historical record.

Worthy of note is that in writings on painting up to the mid-Song, temple painting and their painters took pride of place, while the enthusiasm for scroll painting – the favourite medium of the later literati artists – was less well pronounced.¹⁰ From the mid-Song onward, the situation was inverted. Intriguingly, the situation sketched by the written record seems to be reflected in the present situation in the field: on the one hand we have a vast array of tomb paintings and cave paintings, in particular the Mogao 莫高 cave paintings near Dunhuang 敦煌 in Gansu province which form a magnificent painting gallery in the desert sands spanning a period of a thousand years from 400 to 1400,¹¹ while a limited number of scroll paintings survive from the pre-Song period, and on the other hand we have from the Song onward a large collection of scroll paintings at our disposal while hardly no temple paintings seem to exist for this period. The present situation thus seems to corroborate the findings of the written record, with the result that we can read in many modern survey studies on the history of Chinese painting exactly this history sketched by the literati record.¹² The four Heavenly

⁹ See Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

¹⁰ Before the tenth century, hanging scroll painting were not common and only vertical handscroll paintings were used. In addition, the primary medium for scroll paintings before the tenth century was silk, which was very expensive. Paper became only more common in the Song dynasty.

¹¹ For the Mogao cave paintings, see Roderick Whitfield, *Dunhuang, Caves of the Singing Sands: Buddhist Art from the Silk Road*. London: Textile & Art Publishers, 1995; and Roderick Whitfield et al., *Cave Temples of Mogao: Art and History of the Silk Road*. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000.

¹² Compare for example Wai-kam Ho et al., *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art*. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980; Wen C. Fong et al., *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*. Taipei:

Court paintings that form the topic of this study are not mentioned in either of these surveys, even despite the relative fame of the Yongle gong or the Toronto murals.

A final reason that might also explain the lack of the interest of western scholars for temple painting is art historical methodology. One particularity of temple painting, and especially Heavenly Court paintings, is that they are in fact three-dimensional representations following the architecture of the hall. A temple painting is hard to capture in a two-dimensional frame, be it a standard painting frame or a photograph, not the least because of its size but also because one wall painting is often closely related to other wall paintings in the hall. Chinese temple paintings are basically unified compositions, and their subject-matter should be seen in the context of their location in the hall (i.e. the compass direction), which hall (i.e. the deities belonging to that hall), and importantly, the events taking place in the hall. All this is happening in three-dimensional space that should best be witnessed in situ and with a certain sense of imagination by the viewer or art historian. Traditional methodologies such as period-style or iconography focus on elements of the temple paintings connecting these to elements in other paintings or texts but fail to take into account the ‘big picture’ of the site. The approach to view a temple painting should include the architecture of the hall in its original setting or situation, and presently art historical researches lacks the tools to investigate a painting in that way.

A study of Daoist Heavenly Court painting offers a great opportunity to contribute a new chapter to the history of Chinese painting and test new the methodology of iconopraxis as a new art historical tool for research.

Daoist art

Even though Daoism is around for more than two thousand years, Daoist art has emerged as a topic for research and as a discipline in art history only in the last decade. In spite of an occasional article, book, PhD research, or a rare exhibition in Germany or in Taiwan,¹³ the beginning of Daoist art as a new field in Chinese art history was marked by the exhibition *Taoism and the Arts of China* held at the Art Institute of Chicago in December 2000 that for

National Palace Museum, 1996; Yang Xin et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, and Emmanuelle Lesbire and Liu Jianlong, *La peinture chinoise*. Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2004. This last study is perhaps the most favourable towards temple painting.

¹³ An exhibition on religious art from Taiwan was held in the University Museum for Art and Cultural History of Marburg from 12 October to 23 November 1980. See Jorinde Ebert, Barbara M. Kaulbach, and Martin Kraatz, *Religiöse Malerei aus Taiwan*. Marburg: Religionskundliche Sammlung der Philipps-Universität Marburg, 1980. The exhibition in Taiwan on the cultural artifacts of Daoism was held in the National Museum of History from 22 October to 21 November 1999. See Guoli lishi bowuguan bianji weiyuanhui 國立歷史博物館編輯委員會 (ed.), *Daojiao wenwu* 道教文物. Taipei: Guoli lishi bowuguan, 1999.

the first time attempted to define Daoist art as an independent discipline by making a selection of art objects from various periods, in different media, and with different subject matters. The publications of the exhibition catalogue and its introductory articles was also the first time that a body of scholarly work on this subject was collected.¹⁴ From that moment on, conferences appeared with panels on Daoist art, and Daoist art became a course at western universities. The new interest in Daoist art was did not go unnoticed in China, and in May 2007 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Xi'an, the first conference on Daoist art in China was held. In China too, Daoist art had become a course and research topic. Large exhibitions on Daoist art are scheduled for the near future in Hong Kong and Paris.

The main reason for the belated interest in Daoist art is the inaccessibility of its sources, both in terms of objects and texts. Daoist works of art number much fewer than for example Buddhist art, and are often not immediately recognised as such because Daoist art lacks a distinct and easily-recognisable iconography. Even if Daoist art is identified as such, it is still very hard to relate it to sources and find some concrete information on its historical background, because the official histories only sparsely mention Daoist persons and events, especially after the mid-Song dynasty when they became to reflect the interests of the newly emerged literati class that was responsible for laying down the written historical record. This does not mean Daoist art did not exist, it was simply not written about officially.

The most important source for Daoist history is the Daoist Canon compiled in the Ming dynasty, but the scriptures contained in it are mostly undated and often written in a specific vocabulary difficult to understand to the non-initiated or the modern reader. For example, about eighty percent of the texts in the Daoist Canon consists of ritual texts, providing synopses for ritual proceedings almost without any explanation. In recent decades, the research on Daoist texts has caught up, and has produced an impressive body of secondary literature and reference works;¹⁵ and in the wake of this research, Daoist works of art have also become more accessible by making it possible to relate Daoist art objects to their historical context.

¹⁴ Stephen Little with Shawn Eichman, *Taoism and the Arts of China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. See also Stephen Little, "Daoist Art." Livia Kohn (ed.), *Daoism Handbook*. Leiden: Brill, 2000, pp. 709-746.

¹⁵ The most important reference works are Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛 (ed.), *Zhonghua daojiao da cidian* 中華道教大辭典. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1995; Livia Kohn (ed.), *Daoism Handbook*. Leiden: Brill, 2000; Kristofer M. Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (eds.), *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Daozang tongkao). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. An encyclopaedia on Daoism edited by Fabrizio Pregadio is forthcoming.

A moot point in the present discussion of Daoist art is its definition. Trying to define Daoist art we are confronted with numerous questions on which modern scholars have not presented univocal answers. For example, does the label Daoist art only apply to religious objects associated with Daoism, such as images of Daoist deities in Heavenly Court paintings, or does it also apply to objects related to Daoism on a more conceptual level, such as a painting of the “Joy of Fish”¹⁶ alluding to a famous story in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, which is considered a philosophical text?¹⁷ Does Daoist art also include popular religious art such as images year-prints (*nianhua* 年畫) and images of the gods of Luck, Emolument, and Longevity (*fu lu shou* 福祿壽), or are these forms of popular or folk art? Is a work Daoist when the artist is a Daoist priest (*daoshi* 道士)? If so, should a painting be called Daoist art when the painter is a self-titled “Daoist” (*daoren* 道人), as so many of the literati-painters of the Yuan dynasty used to style themselves? Recent studies on Daoist art are yet to address these problems.

The problem of the definition of Daoist art is not easily resolved, mainly because Daoism itself is very resistant to any form of definition. The *Daode jing* 道德經 (The Way and its Power), the basic work of Daoism, defines itself in the opening chapter as indefinable. In addition, throughout Chinese history, Daoism, its texts and practices, and the people who called themselves Daoists have changed considerably over time. We may add that, very confusing to the modern or western person, the difference with Confucianism, Buddhism or popular culture is not clearly demarcated mainly because there is no strict orthodoxy. We can further wonder if the need for a definition and classification is not perhaps something intrinsic to western science, thus determining how we look at works of art, i.e. with a western eye? In order to look at Daoist art, we would, so to speak, have to develop a Daoist gaze.

Similar to scholars of Indian and Chinese religion arguing that these religions are not defined by orthodoxy (correct believe) but by orthopraxy (correct action),¹⁸ I want argue that

¹⁶ Painted by Zhou Dongqing 周東卿 (late 13th cent.), reproduced in Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, p. 124.

¹⁷ Both Daoists and the state, as sanctioned by the Daoist Canon, never seem to have differentiated between a philosophical and a religious Daoism. It appears that this division was introduced by Song literati in the classification of their bibliographies. See Yu Shiyi, *Reading the 'Chuang-tzu' in the T'ang Dynasty: The Commentary of Ch'eng Hsüan-ying (fl. 631-652)*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000, pp. 17-18. This development shows parallels to the division into literati and professional painters also introduced by literati in the Song dynasty.

¹⁸ See Frits Staal, *Rules without Meaning. Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences*. New York: Peter Lang, 1989. Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. An eminent Chinese scholar of Daoist ritual also stresses the importance of behaviour or action (*xingwei* 行爲) over symbolic meaning, see Chen Yaoting 陳耀庭, “Lun Daojiao yishi de jiegou: yaosu ji qi zuhe 論道教儀式的結構: 要素及其組合.” *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 道家文化研究, 1 (1992), pp. 295-296.

Daoist art, if not many other forms of art, is defined by its praxis, or the actions associated with the object in its time, space, and social specific environment, rather than by a certain “meaning” defined by a doctrine in texts.¹⁹ Looking at and studying Daoist art - the development of a Daoist gaze - becomes an art historical method which I therefore call iconopraxis.²⁰ The present study on Heavenly Court painting will not only venture to investigate a lost tradition in Chinese painting and attempt to reconstruct it in its original environment, but is also aimed at developing and testing a new art historical methodology for looking at and studying art. Daoist Heavenly Court paintings are perfectly suitable for this project precisely because of their association to Daoist ritual and the fact that we have four contemporaneous temple paintings at our disposal for comparison.

Iconopraxis

Iconopraxis holds that an object of art is a representation of a praxis, rather than a representation of period-style, symbolic meaning, text, or social relationships. Investigating the period-style, symbolic meaning (iconology), sign-language as in texts (semiotics), or social relationships between objects and individuals or social institutions (anthropology or sociology of art) are well-established methodologies in (Chinese) art history. The period-style method is premised upon Hegel’s philosophical concept of *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) – and both belonging to a period when Romanticism was at its peaks - that each period has some preponderant features permeating the thinking of a certain age, and which thus differentiates itself from other ages. A certain style defines these features for a certain period or phase in art history.²¹ The iconological method sees an image as a collection of symbols which meanings

¹⁹ In this study, the definition of praxis can easily be compared to Heidegger’s “event” or “enowning” (*Ereignis*), although I do not claim them to be the same. I am most thankful to Marek Wieczorek for pointing out this correspondence to me. See also Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Most fortuitously for our research, the theory of “event” (although the relationship with Heidegger’s philosophy is not made explicit) has also found its way into the study of Chinese anthropology and religion. Elaborating on Kenneth Dean’s anthropological study of local cults, Edward L. Davis for example states in his work on Song religion that “As a description of the formative context, the syncretic field demands that we set our sights on “ritual events” rather than on institutions or texts.” See Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001, p. 212, and Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three Ones: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

²⁰ Iconography or iconology (see below in the main text) professes the same reliance on text in the search for meaning of images. Rather than positing iconography and iconopraxis in a antagonistic relationship, I would prefer to see them as two supplementary methods for investigating art. In the appendix of this study, I use basic iconographic methodology to identify deities although mainly by comparing them to other representations on the same deities, and their numerological qualities and emblematic colours of their robes.

²¹ For the study of period-style in Chinese art history, see Wen C. Fong, “Why Chinese Painting is History.” *Art Bulletin* 85.2 (2003), pp. 258-280, James Cahill, “Some Thoughts on the History and Post-History of Chinese Painting.” *Archives of Asian Art* 55 (2005), pp. 17-33, and its critical reply in Jerome Silbergeld, “The Evolution of a “Revolution”: Unsettled Reflections on the Chinese Art-Historical Mission.” *Archives of Asian Art* 55 (2005), pp. 39-52.

can be grasped by investigating the references to these symbols in the proper texts.²² Semiotics is a ‘science of signs’ which sees an object as a part of a sign-language which meaning can only be understood when it is properly decoded by relating it to other signs in its context. Semiotics can be understood as a linguistic approach to art.²³ In social studies, the object is seen as an agent which “acts” and has therefore aspects normally ascribed to persons or social institutions, for example a cultural biography.²⁴ Although each method has its own merit, and the above list may even present a too simplified a picture of the art historic field which is ever-changing and much broader than can be summarised in the four general methodologies presented here, the investigation of temple paintings and Daoist art in particular, regarding the aforementioned problems, calls for a different approach.²⁵

The approach I propose to take is perfectly illustrated by an anecdote of a Daoist patriarch responding to a question of an artist on how to make Daoist images. The patriarch is Yin Zhiping 尹志平 (1169-1251), a Daoist Quanzhen priest who operates in the same area and period as our temple paintings; the artist, a certain Wang Cai 王才, is further unknown:

“On the seventeenth night at mid-Autumn, the community of the Qizhen guan 栖真觀 (Perching on Verity Monastery) came together and sat in the open air. A sculpture master, Wang Cai, prostrated himself and requested to ask about the making of Daoist images (*Daoxiang* 道像). The master (Yin Zhiping) said: ‘Of the hundreds of images, Daoist images are the most difficult to make. It is not only that they are difficult to sculpt, but to discuss them is difficult as well. For this, you first have to know the

²² For iconology, see Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939 (1962 reprint); and W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

²³ For semiotics, see M. Bal and N. Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History.” *Art Bulletin* 73 (1993), pp. 174-208; Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976; and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976.

²⁴ For art as social relationships, see among others Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; and Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*. Translated by Eva M. Knodt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

²⁵ I want to make clear it is not my intention to falsify other art historical methodologies. I neither want to suggest that iconopraxis is an entirely new and independent methodology because many studies venture or have ventured in the same practical arena of art objects. Thus far, this happened to my knowledge without any foundation in a solid methodology, specifically aimed at addressing issues in art for which art historians had to take recourse to methodologies of other disciplines. In addition, as will become clear in the course of this study, iconopraxis is also indebted to the four disciplines and rather than presenting a completely new and independent methodology, it hopes to present a synthesis of former methodologies, pointing to similar basic questions as style, symbolic values, comparisons to linguistic patterns, and social identities, but unifying them through an overarching principle of praxis.

rituals of Daoism and fully understand the art of physiognomy, only then you can begin to talk about Daoist images.

The great Dao is obscure (*xi* 希) and vague (*yi* 夷); you look at it without seeing it, you listen to it without hearing it. The sounds and colours in front of you are unreal. If you do not hear and see, and pay special attention to prevent [your mind] from galloping outside while at the same time visualise (*cun* 存) what is inside, then this is called real. [However,] if you just do not see and hear, you will be a dead thing; and if you do not visualise what is inside while [letting your mind] gallop outside, then you will only be a thing taken control of [by outer things]. [Therefore,] if you want to see the images of Daoism, then you look and listen outside while preserving (*cun* 存) their meaning by means of inner vision (*neiguan* 內觀).²⁶

Instead of stressing iconography or studying other models or texts, as one perhaps may expect, the Daoist patriarch advises sculptor Wang to study ritual and physiognomy.²⁷ He then specifies his advice by stating that what one sees is unreal but what one can see by visualising or preserving (both *cun* 存) inside one's body, called inner vision (*neiguan* 內觀), is real. The proposed method is thus that by ritual practice one is able to see the true images inside one's body, and that these can then be rendered into sculpture. The real images are contained in the ritual practice as opposed to the works of art which should be considered as representations (and therefore unreal) of the images conjured up during the ritual practice.

I have further generalised and abstracted this Daoist viewpoint on art and applied it to devise a methodology called iconopraxis. In studying the iconopraxis of images (not necessarily Daoist images), we have to reverse the process of creation and consider an image as a representation of a praxis. The praxis is then the accustomed practices or actions, one may even say culture or tradition, associated with that image at a certain time and place for a certain group of people in society. The main and primary question of the method of

²⁶ *Qinghe zhenren beiyu yulu* 清和真人北游語錄 DZ 1310, 2.4a-b. See also Vincent Goossaert, "Liu Yuan, taoïste et sculpteur dans le Pékin mongol." *Sanjiao wenxian* 4 (2005), p. 171. All references to texts in the Daoist Canon (DZ) are based on the numbers provided in Kristofer M. Schipper, *Concordance du Tao-tsang*. Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1975.

²⁷ Knowledge of physiognomy, the art of reading the auspicious and inauspicious features in somebody's face, ensures that images of deities are not depicted with inauspicious signs. This topic has been dealt with elsewhere, albeit for ancestral portraits, see Mette Siggstedt, "Forms of Fate: An Investigation of the Relationship Between Formal Portraiture, Especially Ancestral Portraits, and Physiognomy (*Xiangshu*) in China." *International Colloquium on Chinese Art History, 1991; Proceedings: Painting and Calligraphy, Part 2*. Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1992, pp. 715-743; and Livia Kohn, "A Textbook on Physiognomy: The Tradition of the *Shenxiang quanbian*." *Asian Folklore Studies* 45 (1986), pp. 227-254.

iconopraxis is thus posing the question: “what is the central praxis associated with the image?” This question is hardly different from methodologies such as period-style and iconology which ask: “which style is this painting?” or “which symbolic meaning has this object?” only the focus is different. Iconopraxis presents a different way of looking at art.

Heavenly Court paintings give many clues on the central praxis. First of all, the murals depict an imperial court ritual, in which all the court members, i.e. deities, have gathered for an audience with the supreme deities, the Three Purities (*sanqing* 三清). Secondly, the Chinese name for Heavenly Court paintings contains the word *chao* 朝, which means “court audience.” Thirdly, the hall in which Heavenly Court paintings are depicted are generally called “Three Purities Hall” (*sanqing dian* 三清殿) which is the most holy hall where the Daoist priests perform their rituals. Lastly, an essential rite in Daoist liturgy is called the *chao* or the “court audience” and entails the presentation of a memorial to the supreme deities. This is a recurring pattern in all Heavenly Court paintings (although the supreme deities may sometimes differ in identity). The central praxis of Daoist Heavenly court painting is therefore the Daoist *chao*-audience ritual.

If determining the central praxis of an image is the first step in the methodology of iconopraxis, the next step is to find similar or related representations of that praxis. With representations I do not only mean other images or objects, but in fact all kinds of representations, including textual representations, oral representations, etc.²⁸ If we take the Daoist *chao*-audience ritual as the central praxis, iconopraxis allows us to take other images of court ritual, texts describing *chao*-audience ritual, and anthropological field researches on *chao*-audience rituals as other representations of the same praxis. On the basis of these various forms of representations it is then possible by means of comparison to make a tentative reconstruction of the central praxis, the *chao*-audience ritual. This reconstruction is always by approximation and it is never possible to reconstruct the complete praxis. This reconstructed praxis forms the conceptual framework, a framework which all representations have in common (although not necessarily contain all its constituents).

It is important to note that all representations, including the central visual representation that forms the starting point of the investigation, i.e. the Heavenly Court paintings, are equal in status. Regardless whether a representation is an image or a text, from the viewpoint of the praxis, they have equal value. The art historical methodology of iconopraxis thus, rather paradoxically, means the devaluation of the art object, because it is

²⁸ In this study, I refer to representation with its basic meaning of visual representation, unless otherwise stated.

considered as merely “a representation” and no longer “the art object” and the focus of investigation. It is however necessary to sacrifice the main course to save the dinner, because only by placing the focus on the praxis, which is an abstract reconstruction in time and place primary to the phenomenal world of representations, it is possible, I would argue, to solve the dichotomy between image and text, which haunts western art history since early times (so I would suggest a ten plate Chinese banquet instead of a ten course western dinner).²⁹ A pleasant side-effect of this perception of representations and their relationship to praxis for the scholar of art is that each representation basically becomes a source of information.

The following step in the methodology of iconopraxis is determining the various sub-praxes. Praxis, or more literally, actions always involve people execute these actions, and I therefore maintain that the sub-praxes correspond to the social groups or classes of peoples responsible for the representations, and as well to sources of information. Although the central praxis of a Heavenly Court painting is the *chao*-audience ritual explaining the form of a painting, many related sub-praxes are involved in the production process from conceptual framework to final painting. The sub-praxes in the production of a Heavenly Court painting are closely related to the people involved in the production. In our case, there are three different social groups involved in the production process, Daoist priests, painters, and patrons (who in our case are often Daoist priests, but sometimes just the “community” commissioning the wall paintings). Each group is involved in the painting and its central praxis, the *chao*-audience ritual, in a different way. The Daoist priests perform a *chao*-audience ritual following the conceptual format – the sources for this praxis is found in ritual manuals describing and explaining the proceedings of Daoist liturgy in a certain area (corresponding to a Daoist lineage or order) and period; the painters work out a design, consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of the conceptual framework according to the limits set by their techniques, tools, and costumes – the sources for the praxis of the painters is found in inscriptions left by painters themselves on the walls and by literati writers on painting and art critics mentioning or discussing the technical issues of making a Heavenly Court painting (or related wall painting); and the patrons wish to modify the design in order to have the Heavenly Court painting reflect their wishes and motivations – the sources for this praxis is not found in any textual source by the patrons, simply because no such records are left why a painting was made, but can be inferred from the Heavenly Court paintings

²⁹ On the problem of irreconcilability of image and text in the tradition of western art history, see Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. It is noteworthy that the Chinese script circumvents this problem because Chinese characters consist of an image component beside an pronunciation element.

themselves by comparing them with similar representations of the Heavenly Court (in painting and text) and determining the irregular elements.

The chapters of this study are arranged in an order reflecting the methodology of iconopraxis. I will first provide a chapter providing a survey of surviving Heavenly Court paintings and references thereof placed against their social-historical background, and describe their origin and development. This is an introductory chapter explaining to the reader the various formats of Heavenly Court paintings and their development throughout Chinese history. The second chapter is called “Ritual Foundations” and attempts to provide the conceptual framework or the ritual elements that Heavenly Court paintings have in common (but not necessarily all of them) on the basis of an investigation of Daoist liturgy and the Daoist ritual area or altar space. The third chapter discusses the practices of the painters for producing a wall painting of a Heavenly Court, exploring the painters’ techniques for designing a Heavenly Court painting. The fourth and final chapter is centred on the question of personalisation by the patrons of a Heavenly Court painting, investigating the irregular elements in the four Heavenly Court paintings in order to determine the motivations and reasons behind the commission and the pictorial adjustments. A conclusion provides a summary of the most important results and new insights offered by this study. In the appendix, I provide information and data on the historical background, scholarship, iconography of the deities depicted, and the date of each of the four Heavenly Court paintings. Numbers in the main text connected to deities refer to the drawings of the Yongle gong (1A, 1B, 1C), Toronto (2A and 2B), and the Beiyue miao murals (3A and 3B) included in the appendix. Readers not familiar with the Heavenly Court paintings under discussion are advised to read the appendix first.