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).

Conclusion

Like any other study, a conclusion should answer the questions set out at in the introduction and reward the reader for his or her patience with a succinct summary of the gains and new insights that the study aims to deliver. However, also like any other study, the answers in their turn raise so many new questions that the achieved gains and insights become seemingly rather small when compared with the immense field of unexplored material and sources that are conjured up by the new questions. In the end, one can only worry if it will ever be possible for one researcher to say something conclusive on a topic; and to immediately eleviate the worry, the researcher can only accept his or her own limitations, in the hope that fellow researchers, now or in the future, will deem the new questions raised by the study worthy enough for future investigation.

In order to quench the reader's thirst for conclusions as well as to wet his or her appetite for the perspectives this study offers for future research, I will now discuss some topics that I believe summarise the conclusions in a succinct way and are representive for the gains and new insights that this study offers, and in the meantime I will try to point out the roads that venture into the still unexplored territories of Chinese art.

Iconopraxis

This study is above all an experiment for trying out a new art historical methodology I have devised, iconopraxis. Although growing out of dissatisfaction with existing methodologies, it should be mostly seen as a new tool in the toolbox of the art historian, or of any viewer of art objects if so desired. Iconopraxis does not refute other methodologies, but in dealing with non-western art objects, when source materials are not always as numerous or documented as in the west, or when such methologies are hindered by as a strong emphasis on symbolism and meaning or by the presupposition of an unbridgeable gap between text and image because of the nature of western languages, they have their limitations which iconopraxis hopes to solve by focusing on the actions associated with the art object and by viewing texts, symbols etc. as representations of this same praxis.

Iconopraxis is borne out of this study of Daoist Heavenly Court paintings, and contains a certain measure of elements borrowed from Chinese and in particular Daoist philosophy. It is however possible to relate these Chinese elements to interesting counterparts or parallel theories in modern western thought – one can think of Husserl's theories on phenomenology, Heidegger's focus on "Das Gestel," or Peirre Bourdieu's work on theories of practice – and, although not the same, they open possibilities for establishing a more globally equal view on art.

In its most general sense, iconopraxis aimes to explain why art objects are depicted in a certain way, but rather than viewing them as representations of period-style, symbolic meaning, sign-language, or social relationships, iconopraxis sees them as a representation of a certain accustomed practice which a certain group of people in a certain place and time have in common. The methodology then proceeds in a few steps that are aimed at recreating the process of art production. The process starts with determining the central praxis, in our case the *chao* 朝-audience ritual, which provides a conceptual framework on wich painters base their design. On the basis of the central praxis, it is possible to reconstruct the sub-praxes such as the historical development, the painting techniques, and the personalisations by the patrons.

Of course, the methodology of iconopraxis should be tested critically in the future and on a wide variety of art objects of different periods and regions. I deliberatedly avoided to make the methodology too complicated or to equip it with a distinct apparatus of terms, with the aim of future applications by others. I also tried to avoid to make this a theoretical study because I believe a theory can only prove its worth in its application, not by an abstract, logically coherent construct that can stand on itself as a theory but lacks the blood and tissue (i.e. the art objects themselves) to make it viable. Iconopraxis is at best conceived as an "open-source technology," and free-available who want to make good use of it and has the potential to improve it; at worst, it is simply forgotten or derided as a study on the functionalism of art which it is of course not. A study on the function of Heavenly Court paintings would for example interpret them as tools for visualisations but a study on the praxis would relate them to the *chao*-audience ritual of presenting a memorial as I demonstrated above.

Heavenly Court paintings

Even though the oldest extant temple paintings depicting a Heavenly Court date only to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Yongle gong, Toronto, Nan'an, and Beiyue miao murals of this study, but their development can be traced back to at least the Later Han

dynasty. Heavenly Court paintings are an elaboration on a early Chinese pictorial theme, the *chao*-audience theme, that can also be witnessed in representations of so-called homage scenes, banquet scenes, donor scenes, and tomb procession scenes of the early mediaeval period. These are all representations of the praxis of the traditional Chinese court ritual which is called a *chao*-audience as well. Daoist liturgy is modelled after this court ritual and its bureaucratic proceedings of presenting a memorial, and it is therefore no surprise to find Heavenly Court paintings following this format of the *chao*-audience theme. Curiously, it seems that nobody has ever noticed that this theme existed in Chinese art. A similar study as this one but focused for example on representations of the so-called excursion scenes in temple paintings but also in scroll paintings and their related practices would yield similar results, not to speak of some thematic programmes in Buddhist art.

Our first record of a Heavenly Court painting dates to the sixth century, but ritual areas decorated with images were already used in the fifth century. It still needs to be researched if Heavenly Court paintings was indeed new to Daoism, for example because of the unification of various Daoist lineages around that time and the emerging of a state-sponsored Daoism or as the result of a reaction to Buddhism which emphasised the production and worship of images, or if such images and wall paintings have always been produced, for example as religious temple paintings at the court or in local cults, but of which the evidence of their existence has been lost after so many centuries.

Regardless the haziness of the precise origins of Daoist Heavenly Court paintings, many of the elements of the earlier period are still preserved in the four sets of Heavenly Court paintings of this study, and they form perhaps the best surviving examples of a great tradition in temple painting. This tradition flourished during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, mostly because of the state support for Daoism, but still not much is known about Heavenly Court paintings in the Ming and Qing periods. Because of the mass destruction of Chinese temples in the last century, no reliable figures can be given for the later period. Many sets of hanging scroll paintings depicting a Heavenly Court have survived from the Qing and these can perhaps give a better view on the development in the late imperial period. For reasons of scope, these have not been dealt with in this study; moreover, many paintings still need to be inventorised and are in the collections of museums, in hands of private collectors, or in the hands of Daoist priests. It is my hope that with this study, it will be easier to identify these paintings and appreciate them for their value.

One aspect of the history and development of Daoist Heavenly Court paintings not dealt in this study with in any great measure is the relationship with Buddhist temple paintings,

in particular the so-called Paradise scenes. Some parallels have been pointed out such as the relationship between early Buddhist donor scenes (*gongyang tu* 供養圖) or worshipping the Buddha scenes (*lifo tu* 禮佛圖) and Heavenly Court paintings, or the similarity with Water-and-Land paintings (*shuilu hua* 水陸畫), but still many aspects await research. This research should no doubt include the relationship with Buddhist liturgical practices. The relationship between the wall paintings in the Mogao caves in the far west of China and the temple painting tradition in the Chinese heartland further present great opportunities for future research, not only to investigate the continuing tradition of certain themes, styles, motifs, and and compositional formates in both Buddhist cave paintings and temple paintings, which thus far has received only some scant scholarly attention, but also for the history of temple painting as a whole.

As far as can be judged from this study, it seems that Heavenly Court paintings remained largely immune to influences of Buddhist paintings and its deities, and it is my contention that this immunity was largely intentional. Heavenly Court painting were "annexed" by the state during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-756) in the mid-Tang dynasty as vehicles for promoting the divine authority of the imperial court. It is from this period onwards, that "Daoist" deities in imperial costumes wearing *mian* 冕-crowns and *tongtian* 通天-crowns appear for the first time in Heavenly Court paintings which were previously only seen in portraits, Buddhist donor scenes, or tomb processions. Most of these new deities originally belonged to the state cult, and both the Daoist cult and the state cult were gradually merged during this period, also on an institutional basis in the organisation of the state such as a state sponsored temple network, holidays, an imperial personality cult, and state rituals for Daoist deities and Daoist rituals for imperial ancestors. It was exactly during this period that Buddhism reached its zenith of wealth and power, which was lavishly displayed in large monastic estates, exquisite sculptures, and temple paintings demonstrating to everyone to see in every corner of the empire that Buddhism constituted the veritable representation of divine authority on earth, thus attracting even more followers and income which in turn increasingly undermined the authority and economic solvency of the state. An alliance between the state and Daoism, in conjunction with new laws and persecutions such as that of the Huichang period (844-845), were aimed at curtailing the wealth and power of Buddhism and bringing it under the supervision of the state. The Heavenly Court paintings of that period are the visual testimonies of the alliance between the imperial court and the Daoist clergy, and I would surmise this was an alliance against Buddhism.

Because the Heavenly Court paintings before this period are characterised by supernatural elements and images of deities represented mainly in the costumes of Daoist priests, I have termed this period the Early Phase (400-700), and the period when the imperial court allied with Daoism in the ideological battle against Buddhism the Transitional Phase (700-1000), because the former type of representation was still produced next to the new format with imperial deities, and because the merging of Daoism and state was not yet complete.

The merging between Daoism and state, as well as the assimilation of Buddhism with Chinese society, were completed during the Middle Phase (1000-1400). The various measures taken by the Tang court were continued by the imperial court of the Northern Song, and they reached their apex with the establishment of a Daoist sacred empire by Song Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125) when the state pantheon of deities was subsumed under the Daoist pantheon of deities. The Daoist sacred empire provided the Song imperial court with divine legitimation but was also aimed at the unification of the empire under one ideology, of course much to the dissent of the Confucians and the Buddhists. Daoist Heavenly Court paintings during this period also reached their height in scope, imperial support, the number of deities included in the paintings, and in lavishness.

The Daoist sacred empire of the Northern Song was shortlived and northern China was engulfed first by Jurchen forces in 1127, and later in the early thirteenth century by the Mongol forces. Heavenly Court painting continued during that period in North China, and it regained much of its former glory when the Daoist Quanzhen order rebuilt the Song Daoist temple network and decorated them with wall paintings in the tradition of the Song. The four sets of Heavenly Court paintings of the present study, the Yongle gong murals, the Toronto murals, the Nan'an murals and the Beiyue miao murals, all belong to this period and were painted under the patronage of the Quanzhen order. The more prestigious temple paintings, such as those of the Yongle gong and the Beiyue miao murals, clearly make a claim on continuing (by the Quanzhen order) of the Daoist sacred empire of the Song or on restoring the Song cultural supremacy over the invading forces.

The Quanzhen Heavenly Court paintings however introduced a new element, although only seen in the Yongle gong murals, which was the incorporation of popular deities. These popular deities were represented as scholar-officials and Daoist priests and they belonged to local cults with which the Quanzhen order cooperated, or which the order "converted" (*du* 度) to use their own terminology, together with their temples and incorporated them and their local communities in the Quanzhen monastic network.

The incorporation of and cooperation with local cults of the Quanzhen order would form a prelude for the next period, the Middle Phase (1400-present), when Daoism would form alliances with these local cults and accept their deities, although still very limited, in the ritual pantheon of the Heavenly Court. Liturgy changed accordingly, becoming more diverse, and while the Quanzhen Heavenly Court paintings still continued the classical formats of the Tang and Song, it seems that with the advent of the Ming dynasty the sense of a "classical tradition" had given way to a greater variety of in particular popular traditions, both in painting and liturgy. It seems further that the state, and I mean the governmental administration and its officials and not necessarily the imperial court and the imperial family, was much less supportive of Daoism (perhaps accounting for the lack of an overarching and state-sanctioned classical tradition) with the result that Heavenly Court painting had become more of a local affair with subsequent standards and variations. Most curiously, the historical development of the Daoist Canon, especially from the Song to the Ming, seems to portray a similar rupture with the classical tradition favouring a more local and popularised account of Daoist texts. This period awaits further study.

Painting and ritual

Daoist liturgy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is fairly well documented and further supplemented by modern anthropological research on ritual performances by present-day Daoist priest uncovering traces of the classical ritual tradition. Yet, the role of Heavenly Court paintings, or art objects in general, in these rituals has hardly received any attention. What is most conspicuous about the relationship between Heavenly Court painting and Daoist liturgy is that they virtually show a parallel development. This can be explained by two facts, first that Heavenly Court paintings represent the most essential act of the Daoist liturgy, namely the *chao*-audience of presenting a memorial in a Heavenly Court (none of the many other ritual acts of Daoist liturgy can be related to the murals), and secondly because Heavenly Court paintings only figure in the layout of a Daoist ritual area, open-air altar or temple hall, where the *chao*-audience is performed.

The *chao*-audience provides the ritual foundation and conceptual framework on which painters would base their composition. It is also an ancient pictorial theme in Chinese art but in Daoist Heavenly Court paintings, the theme was expanded with a set of principles for organising visual space which was more directly related to Daoist liturgy. The conceptual framework pertains to five principles which are all closely related to the spatial arrangement of an open-air altar:

1) A division into left and right. Heavenly Court paintings are invariably divided over the left (east) and right (west) wall depicting assemblies of deities focused on the north.

2) A three-tiered altar mound (*daotan* 道壇) and Six Curtains (*liumu* 六幕). The three tiers of a Daoist altar mound are incorporated in the composition of the murals on the central altar niche. The Six Curtains are normally six sets of paintings of Daoist patriarchs, the Three Officials, and the Five Sacred Peaks shielded by curtains placed in front of the altar mound and these sets are also incorporated in the mural composition on the side walls.

3) Three Realms (*sanjie* 三界) of Heaven, Earth, and Water. The Three Realms are the three main governmental departments in the Heavenly Court (originally called the Three Offices, *sanguan* 三官), and the deities on the sidewalls are accordingly divided into three departments, Heaven in the northwest corner, Earth in the southeast corner, and Water in the northeast corner. On a more cosmological level, the Three Realms represent a division of the universe into Heaven, Earth, and Water, and in the human body into the three so-called cinnabar fields (*dantian* 丹田) located in the head, chest, and abdomen. The macro-cosmos of the universe and the micro-cosmos of the body are both hypostases of three energies (*qi* 氣) that emerged from the one original energy (*yuanqi* 元氣) of the Dao after the creation of the cosmos.

4) A northwest-southeast axis. This NW-SE axis connects the Gate of Heaven (*tianmen* 天門) in the northeast corner and the Earth Door (*dihu* 地戶) in the southeast corner in the open-air altar layout. The two gates are represented by central deities such as the Heavenly Sovereign (*tianhuang* 天皇) and Earth Goddess (*houtu* 后土) or by their respective realms of subordinate deities. During the *chao*-audience, the Daoist priest will present his memorial to the Heavenly Court by kneeling in the northwestern direction of the Gate of Heaven, and make a visualised journey to deliver the memorial to the audience of deities assembled in the Heavenly Court. On a cosmological level, the two gates mark the points where yin turns into yang (NW) and yang into yin (SE).

5) Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦). The eight trigrams are abstract representations of the possible transformations of the cosmos, and exist in two circular arrangements of eight trigrams. The King Wen arrangement denotes a representation of the cosmos after its creation or posterior heaven (*houtian* 後天). The Fuxi arrangement is a schematic representation of the cosmos before its creation or anterior heaven (*xiantian* 先天). Heavenly Court paintings organise the eight central deities (of the Eleven Sovereigns) in the King Wen arrangement of

posterior heaven, matching for example the Heavenly Sovereign (and the Gate of Heaven) with the *qian* 乾-trigram of three complete lines symbolising heaven in the northwest corner of the arrangement. The posterior-heaven arrangement is used on the lower tier of the altar mound in the open-air altar layout. Significantly, this arrangement also has a NW-SE axis, dividing the circle of eight trigrams in a yin half (above) and a yang half (below).

The Daoist *chao*-audience is the means to return from the differentiated state of the cosmos after its creation to its original and harmonious state of the Dao before its creation. The Heavenly Court paintings depict the cosmos in its differentiated state after its creation, and are therefore not a symbolic representation of the Dao or something. Because the *chao*-audience exists on both an external level of the visual liturgical performance and the universal deities of the Heavenly Court and an internal level of the visualised cosmos of the Daoist priest's body, we can say that the deity images are at the same time representations of the cosmic energies in their various states of differentiation. It must be noted that in the classical tradition, nowhere is any suggestion made that the images are the deities; as a matter of fact, the images are not strictly necessary or compulsory for executing the Daoist liturgy. The main reason for this curious stance is that the deities are visualised and the paintings act as tools to assist in these visualisations but can also be left out.

The five principles constitute the conceptual framework for a Heavenly Court composition, but painters may not have incorporated all of them in each Heavenly Court paintings. Variations exist. The fact that the Yongle gong murals include all five principles is indicative of the status and importance attached by the Quanzhen patrons to the site.

Wall painters and their techniques

The working methods and social organisation of professional artists in imperial China is a largely neglected subject. On the one hand this neglect can be ascribed to the absence of written sources documenting these artists, and on the other it can be explained by an emphasis on the so-called literati-artists in Chinese art history. On the basis of this study, we can present some preliminary information on the working methods and organisation of wall painters when designing a Heavenly Court painting in the hope to remedy this problem.

Wall painters worked in teams and although texts on painting and inscription suggest that in early times (that is before the Yuan period) workshops consisted of only one master-painter and that in a temple painting project many of such master-painters were working together on one mural, we may expect that they were assisted by various disciple-painters. This phenomenon demonstrates that wall-painters as well as their assistants had a different

social status, and probably organisation, than later workshop painters which were generally all listed in a mural inscription and who often named the workshop after a master-painter who may not be alive anymore or present during the project. The greater social status and fame of the later wall painters suggested by the more detailed inscriptions stands in stark contrast to their absence in the official historical record and in texts on painting of that period. Importantly, the painters of a workshop were generally divided in two groups, one responsible for the east wall and one responsible for the west wall, thus similar to the *chao*-audience. It is however most surprising that there is no detectable difference between the paintings on the east and west walls, suggesting that the painters worked from one design (arguably the responsibility of the master-painter) and that each of them was assigned a particular section or element in the mural.

The titles of the painters known from their inscription do not reveal a strict hierarchy but do emphasise master-disciple relationships. It may also be possible that the constitution of a workshop also changed according to each project and that painters and their disciples were enlisted on a free-lance basis. They could also hail from many different parts of a province, sometimes lying more than two hundred kilometres apart. The master-disciple structure and the existence of an album of designs dating to the Ming dynasty, the so-called Junkunc Album (recently acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art), all suggest that the painting workshops belonged to a guild organisation that emerged in the Song dynasty. There are also interesting links with Daoist master-disciple relationships in which ordination took place through the transmission of texts, similar to the transmission of the design album in a painting workshop. These aspects should be seen in the light of the changing economic situation starting from the Song dynasty, predominantly on the local level, and its relationship with art production constitutes in fact a whole new field of study. As far as our study is concerned, there are interesting parallels here between the rise of painting workshops organised in guilds and the gradual popularisation of Daoist Heavenly Court paintings after the Yuan dynasty.

If a temple painting needs to be painted, it is possible to reconstruct the working procedures of mural production in a chronological order: 1) A project manager is appointed who handles the financial affairs, hires the painters and other workers, and keeps watch on the time-schedule. 2) A painting supervisor is assigned, determining the contents of the paintings and may also provide designs. 3) The painters or workshop are selected and enlisted. 4) The painters are divided into an east group and a west group, each with their respective leaders. 5) The head-painters prepare designs (*xiaoyang* 小樣) in small-scale of which 6) the painters

work out pictorial elements in sketches (*fenben* 粉本). 7) After the wall has been prepared with layers of plaster and smoothened, 8) the painters draws a charcoal design (*xiuhua* 朽畫) on the wall in full-scale providing the general outlines, 9) on which basis an underdrawing is applied in light black ink. 10) Colours are applied, followed by 11) an overdrawing in dark black ink. 12) As final touches, parts of the images can be decorated with gold dust, gold relief, and papier-mâché to add lustre to the composition. 13) A consecration ritual performed by Daoist priests inaugurates the temple painting. The ritual performed is generally a *jiao*-offering and not a rite of "opening the eyes" (*kaiguang* 開光) which seems of Buddhist origin and is introduced in Daoism only fairly late. Of course, the procedures could vary a bit depending on the scale of the project and the number of painters involved.

Central to the working procedures of the wall painting workshop are the use of drawings in the various stages of the process. Although some research has been done on drawings retrieved from the Mogao cave temples and dating to the ninth and tenth centuries, the present findings do not concur with the previous research. One of the main problems is the terminology, that is, by which terms did art critics (and painters we presume) designate which type of drawings. If we use the classification of drawing adopted in western art history, we can discern three types: 1) sketch (*schizzo*), 2) design (*disegno*), and 3) cartoon (*cartone*), which designate 1) drawings of fragmentary elements of the composition in small-scale, 2) drawings of fairly complete compositions in small-scale, and 3) drawings in full-scale. In texts on painting from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries, the western terms can be correlated to the following Chinese terms: 1) sketch – *fenben* 粉本 ("powder-piece"), 2) design – *xiaoyang* 小樣 ("small-scale model"). The cartoon is nowhere mentioned in Chinese texts even though modern art historians equate it with the term *fenben* because in the application of a cartoon red powder is used. This is not substantiated and should await further research.

In modern studies in China and in the West, the term *fenben* has become the general term to designate all kinds of preparatory drawings, and *xiaoyang*, especially among Chinese scholars, to designate drawings made after a mural is painted, thus differentiating the two terms according to the time when the drawing is made, before or after the mural is painted. I have found no evidence for this assumption and rather define the two terms according to their state of depicting a complete composition or not. It must be noted that it seems that Chinese authors were not clear on the exact difference themselves, especially in later period, adding to the confusion.

Having classified the types of drawings more properly, it is now possible to identify some extant drawings and relate these to the praxis of Heavenly Court paintings. It seems that the great majority of the Mogao drawings are sketches of fragmentary compositions. On the basis of these sketches, we can infer that three different types of compositional elements were transferred from model (the master-design) to the wall: details, single figures, and groups of figures. The design in fact constitutes the last stage in which all the three compositional elements are combined into one complete composition. A surviving example of a design, the so-called Wu Zongyuan scroll in the C.C. Wang Collection in New York and generally believed to represent a composition for a wall painting of the early eleventh century, can be correlated to the architecture of the Three Purities Hall of the Yongle gong, proving that the Wu Zongyuan scroll should have been a design for a thirteen-bay hall and that wall painting designs were made in a scale of 1:10, following similar procedures in architecture of that time for which also small-scale models were made.

The breaking down in compositional elements of the drawings is essential because there is a direct relationship with Heavenly Court paintings, in particular with liturgical praxis. Heavenly Court paintings primarily consist of images of deities pieced together in one composition. Some of these deities stand alone but many of them only come in groups, for example the deities of the Five Planets are represented by a fixed group of five deities. In an open-air altar layout, images of these single or group deities would consist of hanging scroll paintings which, as a format, correspond to the format of the various compositional elements of sketches. Therefore, in order to understand the designing process of a Heavenly Court painting, we should view a Heavenly Court painting as consisting of various compositional elements that are joined together in one composition, similar to hanging scroll paintings are joined together to represent a Heavenly Court painting in an open-air altar layout.

Based on the various degrees of integrating the compositional elements, three different types of designs can be discerned with regard to Heavenly Court paintings: a loose design, a joined design, and an integrated design. In a loose design, such as the Nan'an murals, the compositional elements (i.e. the single or groups of deities) are disconnected; in a joined design, the compositional elements are connected but still preserve a format based on hanging scroll paintings pieced together, such as in the Toronto murals. In an integrated design, all the elements are connected without any reference to the format of sketches or hanging scroll paintings. The Beiyue miao murals are a great example of an integrated design. The Yongle gong murals have a design with both joined and integrated elements. The painters availed themselves of various pictorial techniques to connect, or in some cases to deliberately

disconnect, the compositional elements. These techniques varied from the use clouds to eyecontact, to the use of banners, spears and long decorative ribbons running from the top of the imperial *mian*-crowns down to the ground. The result was a play of vertical and diagonal lines that either connected or differentiated the compositional elements in the painting. The measure of integration and number of techniques used is of course indicative of the quality of the design, and in this comparison the Beiyue miao murals would certainly take pride of place.

Patrons and personalisation

A Heavenly Court painting is not only a representation of a ritual praxis defining the painter's conceptual framework or of the technical process of designing a viable and interesting composition, but also of the particular choices and motivations by the patrons of the murals that decide the final composition. The motivations and aspirations of the patrons are revealed by the irregular elements in the Heavenly Court composition. This irregular element is what I term a personalisation introduced by the patrons.

A detailed study of the four Heavenly Court paintings under discussion reveals that the irregular elements mainly pertain to two types of personalisation. One is the inclusion of certain deity figures not common to the standard ritual pantheon as described in ritual manuals of that time or usually not depicted in other Heavenly Court paintings. The other is the introduction of a particular ritual configuration, a distribution of deities which is not seen in other contemporaneous Heavenly Court paintings or cannot be directly related to configurations promoted by ritual manuals. The personalisations are therefore small changes applied to the standard or normative representation of the Heavenly Court. This normative representation is no doubt an ideal and may have never existed, because each patron would costumise a composition and adapt it also to the local situation of the temple.

Personalisations of deity figures can be further divided into two groups: portraits of historical figures, and images of generic figures. Portraits of historical figures are included in various Heavenly Court paintings. The image of Quanzhen patriarch Qiu Chuji 丘處機 (Veritable Changchun 長春真人, 1148-1227) is included on the position of the Heavenly Sovereign, and probably representing this deity, in the Toronto murals, thus virtually making him the Gate of Heaven and the main focus of the *chao*-audience and the presentation of the memorial. The portrait of Quanzhen patriarch Sun Lüdao 孫履道 (fl. 1312-1327) is incorporated twice in the Yongle gong murals. Once on the outside of the central shrine wall on a location where in other representations the patrons or donors of the murals are depicted,

and also once on the east wall rendered as the deity of Luck or Emolument of the Three Stars. The deity of Longevity is the third member of this group. A portrait of Song Emperor Taizong (r. 976-997) is found depicted, I would argue, in the Beiyue miao murals as part of the archaic model copied by the Yuan painters. The Yongle gong murals also contain several (idealised) portraits of heroes of local cults who were incorporated in the ritual pantheon of the Quanzhen order, such as Zhao Yu 趙昱, Li Bing 李冰, Erlang 二郎, the Three Mao 茅 brothers, and probably some more others who I have not been able to identify. Of a different nature is the portrait of Zhang Daoling 張道陵, the first patriarch of the Heavenly Master order in the Han dynasty, which is part of the Six Curtains, depicting the Daoist patriarchs and masters receiving special worship during the rituals.

The inclusion of the portraits of these (semi-) historical figures in the Heavenly Court of course elevates them to the status of deities and members of the Heavenly Court where they are elegible for receiving memorials and wielding power in the human world. As mentioned above, a Heavenly Court painting is an abstract representation of energies after the creation of the cosmos, and the deities are therefore considered to be pure manifestations of original energy (*yuanqi* 元氣) from which the cosmos was created. Humans are not part of this world (although Daoist priests, as officials of the celestial bureaucracy, have access because they have transformed themselves), and the cultural heroes of the local cults have theoretically speaking no place in the Heavenly Court. Their inclusion is therefore a strong indication of the motivations of the patrons and, we may assume, of the (local) communities that venerated these persons. Patrons could immortalise themselves or their patriarchs and the communities could win prestige and divine authority.

The personalisation of generic figures seems to have happened less often but can be explained in a similar way. In some cases, the patrons would change the standard representations of deities with less common ones, and the Nan'an murals are particularly demonstrative of this feature. It for example depicts the deities of the Northern Dipper, who are normally depicted as seven officials, as seven exorcists with long hair holding swords. The same temple also replaces six deities of the Twelve Zodiacal Mansions, usually depicted as officials, by the very diverse group of two officials, a Daoist priest, a warrior, a scholar, and a woman (the other six deities are damaged). The images can hardly represent portraits of historical figures, but as generic icons they should have had great value to the local community. The Nan'an is a temple dedicated to a Daoist local deity Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581-682), a famous physician and Daoist priest of the Tang dynasty, whose cult dominates

the site. As representations of persons of a more mundane society – the abundance of females in the Nan'an murals are particularly noteworthy – rather than as officials of a remote imperial court (either in heaven or on earth), the popular figures attain the same divine status as the more standard officials and Daoist priests. This vision also reflects better the ambition of the local cult community rather than the aspirations of the Daoist patriarchate or the imperial court alone.

Personalisations of the ritual configuration pertain to irregular elements in the selection of certain deities or in the choice for an entirely different configuration. The patrons have a great repertoire of deities to chose from, i.e. the ritual pantheon at large, so their choices for particular deities must have been motivated by some reason, either because they were trained in a certain ritual tradition that favoured certain deities, or because the temple site or community encouraged them to make these choices. The personalisations of the ritual configuration therefore reveal the points of emphasis in the Daoist liturgy performed at the site in question and, more indirectly, provide important information on the liturgical background of the patrons, such as their lineage and ritual tradition, and the social needs of the community these liturgies were designed to cater to.

For example, the Nan'an murals show a most basic configuration for a Heavenly Court painting, but the particular choice of some deities such as those of the Twenty-Four Heavenly Emperors, the inclusion of the Four Spirits (four generals representing the dragon, tiger, red bird, and turtle-snake guarding the four directions) rather than the usual Four Saints (Tianpeng, Tianyou, True Warrior, and Black Killer) would suggest that the murals were designed especially for a liturgy centred on the recitation of the *Salvation Scripture* (*Duren jing* 度人經) in which these deities played important roles during the accompanying visualisations. The *Salvation Scripture* was one of the most popular scriptures of Daoism and was used for rituals of the salvation of the dead which had the soul of the deceased transferred from the realm of death in the north to that the Daoist heavens of eternal life in the south. The prominent positions of the deities of the Northern Dipper (in exorcist dress we remember, probably because many deities invoked by exorcists hailed from the realms of death in the north) and the Southern Dipper at the north ends of the west and east walls would also fit this *Salvation Scripture* scheme. Because the Nan'an was mainly a local cult site dedicated to Sun Simiao, this popular scripture, which could also be used for exorcist means (again involving the deities of the Northern Dipper), would also be very appropriate to cater to the more mundane needs of this local community being less concerned with ideological or political endeavours of the Quanzhen patriarchate or imperial court.

The personalisation of the ritual configuration of the Toronto murals is somewhat similar to the Nan'an murals, and seems to be particularly geared to a so-called Rite of Deliverance (*liandu* 鍊度, litt. "salvation by means of refinement") which is also a ritual for the salvation of the dead but which does not work with visualisation of deities and recitation such as in the case of the *Salvation Scripture* but by means inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹) and the refinement of the priest's bodily energies. The memorials contained in ritual manuals indicate that the majority of deities selected for the Toronto murals were addressed with these memorials for their role in the Rite of Deliverance. The preference of the patrons for the Rite of Deliverance thus explains the inclusion of the deities of the Nine Heavens, who are not seen in other Heavenly Court compositions but do appear in the lists of memorials addressed to the celestial bureaucracy, as well as the replacement of the Saint Ancestor and the Saint Mother, two central deities of the so-called Four Emperors and Two Empresses introduced by the Northern Song court, by the King Father of the East and Queen Mother of the West who play particularly important roles in the Rite of Deliverance. The succession of deities in the Toronto murals, if seen running from south to north on the east wall and then on the west wall thus form the southeast corner proceeding to the northwest corner, also shows an ever more etherical refinement of cosmic energies, moving from more common stellar deities on the east wall to the Gate of Heaven personified, most significantly, by the portrait of the Quanzhen patriarch Qiu Chuji, and then to the Nine Heavens finally to coalesce with the Three Purities (represented as statues in the hall) and return to the Dao.

The personalisation of the ritual configurations of the Yongle gong and Beiyue miao murals are played out on a more ideological and political level. The Yongle gong murals adopt a configuration focused on eleven central deities (or actually thirteen to be more precise), called the Eleven Sovereigns, which does nowhere appear in other Heavenly Court paintings commissioned by the Quanzhen order. The Quanzhen order rather used a configuration of the Four Emperors and Two Empresses, together with the Three Purities called the Nine Sovereigns, as demonstrated by many stele inscriptions. The configuration with Eleven Sovereigns was installed during Song Emperor Huizong's reign as part of creating a Daoist empire in which this Daoist Heavenly Court constituted the most complete ritual pantheon, incorporating all Daoist lineages and their deities (as well as those of the state cult) and even a deity, the South Pole Emperor, of whom Huizong believed himself to be a reincarnation. The choice for this Song configuration is motivated, I would argue, by the Quanzhen order's ambition to restore the Daoist sacred empire installed by Emperor Huizong.

The inclusion of several Daoist local cult deities, mentioned above, is however a further personalisation of the original Song configuration, demonstrating that the Quanzhen order also included the local cults in this Daoist sacred empire, clearly adjusting themselves to the needs of the time and foreshadowing the changes to come in the Ming and Qing periods.

The ritual configuration of the Beiyue miao murals follows an archaic model of the Transitional Phase (700-1000) focused rather on the deities of the five directions (the Five Sacred Peak deities), even though the murals were certainly painted in 1270. The Beiyue miao is dedicated to the deity of the Northern Sacred Peak ruling over the northern dominion. Many other irregular elements, such as painting style, crowns of deities, dark, bearded faces for central deities etc. not seen in Yuan period temple paintings, would indicate that the murals are painted after an archaic model. An investigation of these irregular elements and stele inscriptions demonstrates that the original murals, i.e. the archaic model, were painted on the commission of Song Emperor Taizong in 991. His portrait as a militairy commander is incorporated in the murals. This archaic model was personalised, as the stele inscriptions accompanying the renovations of 991 demonstrate, in order to show the Chinese cultural supremacy over the foreign Khitan tribes threatening the Song empire from the north. The Quanzhen order that renovated the Beiyue miao in 1270, I argue, choose to copy the Song archaic model precisely because the political situation, with China invaded by the Mongols also from the north, was largely similar to that of Taizong's but now with the Mongols occupying northern China.

The personalisation of a Heavenly Court paintings can reveal valuable information on the background of the patrons and sometimes even on the date of the murals when this is insecure. The dating of the archaic model in the Beiyue miao murals is a good example. Another example are the Toronto murals, which are undated but because of their incorporation of the Qiu Chuji portrait and their provenance from the Pingyang area in central Shanxi province as well as their ritual configuration focused on the Rite of Deliverance, it is possible to link the murals to the Quanzhen priest Song Defang 宋德方 (Veritable Piyun 披雲真人, 1183-1247). Song Defang was Qiu Chuji's disciple and is known to have been active in the Shanxi area during the last half of his life where he "converted" many temples and ordered several artistic projects such as the Longshan cave sculptures of 1234, which also comprise an image of Qiu Chuji shortly after the patriarch's death, the printing of the Daoist Canon, and the designing of the architecture of the Yongle gong. He was also initiated in the Thunder rites of the Shenxiao lineage to which the Rite of Deliverance is closely related.

Song Defang would therefore be an excellent candidate for having commissioned the Toronto murals, and I would therefore date the Toronto murals between 1234 and 1247.

It is my thesis that the personalisations of a Heavenly Court painting are a direct reflection of the social identity of the patrons, or more precisely, of the social identity of the group of people promoting the diffusion of the images. Rather than seeing some individual images of portraits of historical figures, the results of this study suggest that the Heavenly Court paintings as a whole are representations of the people promoting the paintings. If a Heavenly Court painting is promoted by people on an imperial level, we are prone to encounter more imperial figures in the Heavenly Court representation than when it is promoted by a local community, which would thus explain the personalisation of the deity as more mundane and popular figures such as in the case of the Nan'an murals. Inversedly, this would mean that images of deities take on the identity of the people promoting this deity, a sort of social portrait. This social portraiture is also witnessed, in a very general sense, in the development of Heavenly Court painting proceeding in four phases. In the Early Phase (400-700) the deities were represented as Daoist priests and the main promotors of the religion and the images were the Daoist priests themselves. In the Transitional Phase (700-1000) imperial deities were introduced in conjunction with the support for Daoism of the imperial court. This imperial support reached its peak in the Middle Phase (1000-1400) when the imperial representation of the deities became standard. With the merging of Daoism with local cult in the Late Phase (1400-present), deities in more popular representations were added such as scholars and generals (even though the common man remains absent in the Daoist Heavenly Court). The Heavenly Court paintings become representations of the alliances of the social groups promoting the paintings, thus suggesting a correspondence of identity between the viewer and the deity image, but this would take us into a whole new field of study which we will leave now for the future.