

RICHARD J. SAGE

## Messianic Deity and Daoist Sage–Ruler: Song Huizong’s Commentaries on the Daoist Classics

### ABSTRACT:

The present article investigates several commentaries on Daoist works attributed to Song emperor Huizong; it also studies the role those commentaries played within the emperor’s overarching endeavor to install his vision of Daoism as the de facto state religion. Inspired by the political instrumentalization of exegetical literature during Wang Anshi’s reforms a half-century earlier, the imperially authored and authorized commentaries were part of his and the court’s attempt to gain absolute moral control over state ideology. To do this, Huizong styled himself as both a Daoist deity whose purpose was to guide its subjects to universal salvation, and simultaneously as erudite sage–ruler who governs in accordance with the guidelines provided by the ancient Daoist classic – *Laozi*. The exegetical literature on the Daoist classics produced by Huizong and his subordinates was intended to substantiate this picture and to spread among the literati elite the emperor’s vision of a state ideology unified under Daoist guidance.

### KEYWORDS:

*history of religion, philosophy of religion, Song dynasty, early Daoist texts, exegesis, Daodejing, Chongxu zhide zhenjing, Scripture of Western Ascension (Xishengjing), Scripture of Salvation (Durenjing), Divine Empyrean (Shenxiao)*

### INTRODUCTION

This article investigates several pieces of Daoist exegetical literature attributed to Song Huizong 宋徽宗 (1082–1135, r. 1100–1125) and the role they played within the emperor’s overarching endeavor to install his vision of Daoism as the de facto state religion.

Huizong, the penultimate ruler of the Northern Song 北宋 period (961–1127), is commonly remembered as one of the most avid supporters of Daoism ever to sit on an imperial throne. And as well, of course, for maneuvering his empire towards the brink of collapse. Much has been written about Huizong’s purported obsession with Daoist beliefs,

➤ Richard J. Sage, Jao Tsung-I Academy of Sinology, Hong Kong Baptist U.

I THANK HON Tze-ki and the editors and reviewers of a previous article of mine for, knowingly or unknowingly, inspiring me to intensify my research into the political dimension and historical impact of Huizong’s commentaries. I am deeply grateful to *Asia Major*’s anonymous reviewers and especially the final content editor for their valuable suggestions to improve upon my presentation of these preliminary results. Remaining shortcomings are my own.

and about a connection between those beliefs and the Song empire's defeat by the Jurchen-led Jin 金 dynasty (1115–1234) that led to the permanent loss of its northern territories. Scarred by these mortifying events, politicians, and historians from the succeeding Southern Song 南宋 era (1127–1279) and subsequent dynasties made Huizong's alleged Daoist-inspired *laissez-faire* attitude towards governmental affairs out to be one of the main reasons for the debacle at the northern front. Huizong's critics not only decried his decadence, megalomaniacal cultural projects, and reliance on corrupt officials, but further emphasized that his purported trust in magic-making charlatans and his religious delusions were major contributing factors to the state's vulnerability. Allegations of this kind are, of course, common practice within traditional Chinese historiography. As happened to every other hapless sovereign before and after him, Huizong's reputation fell victim to the highly moralizing interpretation of events that dominated China's long-practiced genre of dynastic history-writing. Thus, given the limited and biased source material available, it remains a difficult task to assess the veracity of the traditional judgements found in the *History of Song* (*Song shi* 宋史) and privately composed works of late-Song scholars that affect our impression of Huizong and his rule up until today.<sup>1</sup>

But it is certain that the vilification of Huizong and his closest advisers was not only a by-product of anti-Daoist propaganda. In recent years, an increasing number of scholars has begun to challenge the purely negative evaluation of Huizong's reign and to doubt whether the emperor was indeed merely a naïve puppet, controlled by nefarious priests and political advisors.<sup>2</sup> Peter K. Bol, for example, has pointed out that the disdainful depiction of Huizong and his governance was not solely motivated by the Southern Song scholars' grievance over the fall to the Jin.<sup>3</sup> Neither was their contempt merely rooted in the emperor's entanglements with Daoist priests and intellectuals. More decisively, they rejected the increasingly autocratic style of rulership that

<sup>1</sup> Regarding Huizong's reputation and the problems that arise in relying solely on the traditional historiographical sources, see, e.g., Ari Daniel Levine, "The Reigns of Hui-tsung (1100–1126) and Ch'in-tsung (1126–1127) and the Fall of the Northern Song," in Denis Twitchett and Paul Jakov Smith, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 5. Part One: The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907–1279* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2009), pp. 556–59; also Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2014), pp. xi–xvii, 507–15.

<sup>2</sup> Within Western scholarship, see, e.g., Levine, "Reigns of Hui-tsung and Ch'in-tsung"; Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*; chaps. re. Huizong in Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, eds., *Religion and Society in Tang and Sung China* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 1993) and Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, eds., *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See Peter K. Bol, "Whither the Emperor? Emperor Huizong, the New Policies, and the T'ang-Song Transition," in *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 31 (2003), pp. 105–6.

gained impetus with the “New Policies” (*xinfa* 新法) reforms of Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086)<sup>4</sup> and, seemingly contradictory to Huizong’s later image as negligent ruler, reached its climax during his reign.<sup>5</sup> Fittingly, the other chief culprit made out by later historians was not a known Daoist but Huizong’s long-term grand councilor (*zaixiang* 宰相) Cai Jing 蔡京 (1046–1126), the major driving force behind the revitalized reform movement.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Huizong himself, Cai Jing, or another *éminence grise* held the actual authority within the governance during this era is a question that will likely never fully be resolved, particularly when one focuses solely on historiographical sources. Yet, when it comes to the emperor’s involvement with the Daoist movements of his time, and their potential role within the court’s attempt to cement its absolute political authority, an alternative set of sources has thus far been widely overlooked: the vast corpus of Daoist exegetical literature produced by Huizong and his followers.<sup>7</sup> If one regards each of the emperor’s interpretations

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the contents and implementation of the “New Policies,” see Paul Jakov Smith, “Shen-tsung’s Reign and the New Policies of Wang An-shih, 1067–1085,” in Twitchett and Smith, eds., *Cambridge History of China. Vol. 5.1*, pp. 383–435.

<sup>5</sup> Discussed at length throughout Bol, “Wither the Emperor,” and idem, “Emperors Can Claim Antiquity Too: Emperorism and Autocracy Under the New Policies,” in Ebrey and Bickford, eds., *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China*, pp. 173–205.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent study regarding the process of Cai Jing’s vilification throughout the compilation of *Song shi*, see Charles Hartman, “A Textual History of Cai Jing’s Biography in the *Songshi*,” in Ebrey and Bickford, eds., *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China*, pp. 517–64.

<sup>7</sup> Brief introductions to Huizong-era commentaries can be found in, e.g., Livia Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension* (Albany: SUNY, 1991), pp. 30–33; Liu Peide 劉佩德, *Liezi xueshi* 列子學史 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2015), pp. 107–39; intro. to Wan Manlu 萬曼璐, *Song Huizong Daode zhenjing jieyi* 宋徽宗道德真經解義 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2017). See also companion works to the Daoist canon (*Daozang* 道藏), e.g., corresponding entries in Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: U. Chicago P., 2004; hereafter cited as Schipper and Verellen), as well as Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 and Zhong Zhaopeng 鍾肇鵬, eds., *Daozang tiyao* 道藏提要 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005). The survey-type nature of these works, however, limits discussion of commentaries. There exist only a few works that consider political implications of the writings (exclusively focusing on *Laozi* 老子 commentaries), e.g., Yuan Yi-hsuan 袁翊軒, “Yi jing ze sheng, yi dong ze wang: Song Huizong ‘yu jie daode zhenjing’ zhong de zhengzhi sixiang” 以靜則聖，以動則王，宋徽宗“御解道德真經”中的政治思想，in *Zhengzhi kexue luncong* 政治科學論叢 53 (2012), pp. 95–120; Liu Ts’un-yan’s 柳存仁 two essays on the *Laozi* interpretations by Tang emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r. 690–705; 712–56), Song Huizong, and Ming Taizu 明太祖 (r. 1368–98): “Daozang ben san sheng zhu Daode jing huijian jia pian” 道藏本三聖注道德經會箋甲篇，in *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao* 中國文化研究所學報 4.2 (1971), pp. 287–342, and “Daozang ben san sheng zhu Daode jing huijian yi pian” 道藏本三聖注道德經會箋乙篇，in *ibid.* 5.1 (1972), pp. 9–74. Liu’s ideas on these three imperial commentaries are summarized briefly in a published lecture given at the Australian National University in 1973; see *On the Art of Ruling a Big Country: Views of Three Chinese Emperors* (Canberra: Australian National U.P., 1974). To the best of my knowledge, no complete translations of any Huizong-era commentary has been published, although brief excerpts of Huizong’s *Laozi* reading can be found throughout

of the Daoist classics on their own, this neglect is at first glance understandable. From literary or philosophical perspectives, they are hardly pioneering, and sometimes easily outshone by the works of his subordinates.<sup>8</sup> But taken in their entirety and analyzed in context, Huizong's writings offer an intriguing glimpse into the religio-political agenda that the potentate pursued.

A half-century prior to Huizong, Wang Anshi and his associates composed a new, standardized interpretation of the Confucian classics that they then instituted as official curriculum for the civil service examinations. Their goal was to employ these writings to establish a new ideological orthodoxy under their own interpretative sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> As this paper will argue, the official commentaries authored and/or authorized by Huizong followed the same purpose, albeit being based on a different doctrine, and with the intention to claim an entirely different dimension of "authority." The imperially authored (and authorized) commentaries were part of an overarching endeavor to gain absolute moral dominion and control over the state ideology. To claim this authority, Huizong styled himself as both a Daoist deity whose purpose was to guide its subjects to universal salvation, and simultaneously as erudite sage-ruler who governs in accordance with the guidelines provided by the ancient classic text of Daoism – *Laozi* 老子.<sup>10</sup> The exegetical literature on the classics produced by Huizong himself, as well as by his confidants at court, was intended to substantiate this picture and

---

ibid., and in Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, p. 364. Huizong's preface to *Xisheng jing* 西昇經 was translated by Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy*, pp. 32–33. Snippets of three *Liezi* 列子 commentaries are provided by Wayne Kreger, "Echo of the Master, Shadow of the Buddha: The *Liezi* 列子 as a Medieval Masters Text," unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2016), pp. 223–27.

<sup>8</sup> As I have previously argued, Fan Zhixu's 范致虛 (d. 1129) subcommentary on Huizong's *Liezi* was indeed composed with the intention to give further depth to the emperor's level of exegesis, thereby making his work more palatable to the literati elite; see Richard J. Sage, "We Don't Need No (Confucian) Education! A Northern Song Reading of the *Liezi*," in *TP* 109.5–6 (2023), pp. 579–623.

<sup>9</sup> Chu Ming-kin, *The Politics of Higher Education: The Imperial University in Northern Song China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U.P., 2020), pp. 91–96.

<sup>10</sup> Scholars risk making generalized and anachronistic classifications such as "Confucian," "Daoist," or "Buddhist." Nonetheless, in this article I choose to employ these commonly used translations for the so-called "Three Teachings 三教" (Ru 儒, Dao 道, and Fo 佛). These labels neither accurately describe such classics in their original contexts, nor do they necessarily reflect on the philosophical, political, or religious convictions of later commentators. By the time of Huizong, the most authoritative ancient (or believed to be ancient) texts had already been included within various curriculums and canons associated with each of the Three Teachings and were treated accordingly by many Song-era authors.

It so happens that this issue of *Asia Major* presents an article that deals with discussions of the Three Teachings from an earlier period; see Lucas Rambo Bender, "Discursive Paradigms for Relating the 'Three Teachings' in China's Period of Division."

spread among the literati elite the emperor's vision of a state ideology unified under Daoist guidance.

In order to give appropriate background and then to evidence my interpretation of Huizong's agenda of Daoist ideology and his self-divinizing mission, the article first describes the earlier Song-court attempt to revamp Confucian ideology as spearheaded by Wang Anshi. Huizong's was a Daoist approach, but given that Wang's reformists also wrote Daoist-oriented pieces, this section focuses on the way Huizong's Daoism differed starkly from that of the earlier Daoist writings at the Song court. In the section following that, we see that through certain courtiers, the emperor Huizong allied himself with a new Daoist movement in order to become linked with new Daoist revelations and texts. This led to his identification as a divine guide who unifies the differing Daoist traditions and ideas and aids his people, much like a bodhisattva ideal.

Useful evidence for Huizong's agenda comes from the subsequent examination of several of the emperor's writings. First I investigate three examples of his prefaces: excerpts from two prefaces associated with sacred texts (that attached to *Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing futu* 靈寶無量度人上品妙經 and that to *Xisheng jing* 西昇經), and a complete translation of his preface to the Daoist classic *Liezi* 列子. Following that, I take up Huizong's exegetical writings: excerpts from his comments to *Laozi* chapter 20, and discussions of his comments to *Liezi* chapters 2 and 3. Along the way, for comparison, I take into consideration, both in the main discussion and in the footnotes, exegetical works by three of Huizong's underlings at court.

#### HUIZONG'S INSPIRATION

Song Huizong may have taken Wang Anshi as his model for attempting to grasp absolute control over the curriculum of the state-run school system, but of course he was by far not the first person to have done so.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in terms of scope and execution of education reforms,

<sup>11</sup> Other famous examples include Wang Mang 王莽 (ca. 45 BC–23 AD), who founded the Xin 新 dynasty (9–23) but was demonized as a usurper of the Han by subsequent Chinese historians. Huizong has been provocatively compared with Wang Mang; see Chu, *Politics of Higher Education*, pp. 88–89. Consider also Tang emperor Xuanzong, whose Daoist ideas are relatively comparable to those of Huizong. Just as under the aegis of Huizong, Xuanzong's promotion of Daoist teachings led to the establishment of Daoist schools and to adjustments in the official state curriculum; see Timothy H. Barrett, *Taoism under the Tang* (London: The Wellsweep Press, 1996), pp. 60–73. Xuanzong's *Laozi* commentary inspired several subcommentaries, and, together with his evidently politically motivated fostering of Daoism, served as a guide for Huizong in his endeavors generally. The policies of Huizong's court were reactions primarily to religio-political developments during Northern Song – far detached from the

and particularly regarding the extensive use of one's own written commentarial literature, Wang Anshi surely was the most direct inspiration for the Huizong court. The pinnacle of Wang's efforts was the creation of a new, standardized interpretation of the Confucian classics that he worked on together with his son Wang Pang 王雱 (1044–1076) and his close political ally Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿 (1032–1111). These *New Commentaries on the Three Classics* (*Sanjing xinyi* 三經新義) were presented to emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1048–1085; r. 1067–1085) in 1075,<sup>12</sup> and soon afterwards were instituted as official curriculum for the civil service examinations. Examinees at the Imperial Academy (Taixue 太學) had to align with the reformers' views or risked their future careers as scholar-officials. Evidently, Wang and his allies employed exegetical literature as tool to establish a new ideological orthodoxy under their interpretative sovereignty and to guarantee a continuous supply of graduates who were both indoctrinated by the reformers' views on the classics and loyal to the autocratic leadership at court.<sup>13</sup>

Wang and his associates did not only force their reinterpretations of the Confucian classics on the upcoming bureaucrats, they also tried to appropriate the Daoist classics for their purposes. During the years of factional struggles at the Shenzong court, a veritable flood of commentaries to *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* were produced by both the reformers and their opponents.<sup>14</sup> Although the extant commentaries on the Daoist classics authored by the reformers did not promote any specific policies, their publication was surely not purely motivated by scholarly interest in the two most prominent Daoist texts or by personal likings. More important was that such writing was a public act. The romanticized picture of the scholar who is "Confucian" in public but "Daoist" in private hardly applies to these authors, since there was nothing private about writings submitted to the emperor and distributed to fellow scholars and court officials.<sup>15</sup>

---

situation during Xuanzong's lifetime. An early discussion of the *Laozi* commentaries authored by these emperors is provided in Liu Ts'un-yan's two essays cited n. 7, above.

<sup>12</sup> The three were the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), *Book of Odes* (*Shi jing* 詩經), and *Book of Documents* (*Shu jing* 書經).

<sup>13</sup> See also Chu, *Politics of Higher Education*, pp. 91–96.

<sup>14</sup> See Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峰, *Lao Lie Zhuang sanzi zhi jian shumu* 老列莊三子知見書目 (Taipei: Zhonghua congshu bianshen weiyuanhui, 1965) 1, pp. 81–87; 2, pp. 73–79.

<sup>15</sup> That these writings were composed for and accessible to a wider readership is further confirmed by the fact that many commentaries of both reformers and anti-reformers were later included in various compendia and/or officially recognized Daoist canons. Short descriptions of the works in question can be found in Schipper & Verellen, pp. 640–47, 670–73, 676–78, and Fang Yong 方勇, *Zhuangzi xueshi* 莊子學史 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008), vol. 2, chaps. 2–3.

Noteworthy, Wang Anshi and the commentators associated with him were among the first who deliberately and openly synthesized Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist elements within their readings of the Daoist classics. Remarkable in this regard were their repeated (though not overly convincing) attempts to demonstrate that Master Zhuang (Zhuangzi 莊子; traditionally fourth century BC) indeed was a Confucian in disguise and that the underlying intention of his eponymous work was to support Master Kong's (Kongzi 孔子, or Confucius; 479-551 BC) teachings.<sup>16</sup> With this claim, the authors subordinated the Daoist classic to the Confucian hegemony. And as their readings of the Confucian classics (temporarily) became the only accepted ones, they thereby effectively laid claim to the interpretative authority over Daoist moral and social philosophy as well. The syncretistic nature of their writings thus illustrates these politicians' grasp for control over the entire spectrum of religio-philosophical discourses rather than an attempt to appease Daoist practitioners.

Wang Anshi's reforms were partly reversed during the early reign of Shenzong's successor Zhezong 哲宗 (1077-1100; r. 1085-1100), when grand empress-dowager Gao 高太皇太后 (1032-1093) took over the regency for the underage emperor and installed Wang's most famous adversary, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) as grand councilor. And even though Zhezong himself favored the reform movement and reinstated some of the New Policies after the death of his grandmother,<sup>17</sup> the power struggles between the two factions continued into the first years of his younger brother's reign. Soon, however, Huizong decided to unequivocally side with the reformers, then led by Cai Jing. After the emperor expelled Cai's opponents from court and appointed him grand councilor, the court introduced a new, far-reaching set of policies that was much akin to those initiated by Wang,<sup>18</sup> but with an even stronger focus on the educational system.<sup>19</sup> And Wang's instrumentalization of commentarial literature to cement his own visions as state

<sup>16</sup> See Fang, *Zhuangzi xueshi* 2, pp. 25-29, 39-42, 52-53.

<sup>17</sup> Regarding the factional disputes prior to Huizong, see Smith, "Shen-tsung's Reign," pp. 478-83, and Ari Daniel Levine, "Che-tsung's Reign (1085-1100) and the Age of Faction," in Twitchett and Smith, eds., *Cambridge History of China. Vol. 5.1*, pp. 484-505.

<sup>18</sup> See Levine, "Reigns of Hui-tsung and Ch'in-tsung," pp. 571-602.

<sup>19</sup> See John W. Chaffee, "Huizong, Cai Jing, and the Politics of Reform," in Ebrey and Bickford, eds., *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China*, pp. 31-32; idem, "Sung Education: Schools, Academics, and Examinations," in John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 5. Part Two: The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907-1279* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2015), pp. 301-5; and Levine, "Reigns of Hui-tsung and Ch'in-tsung," pp. 585-89.

orthodoxy appears especially to have inspired Huizong and Cai Jing's reform faction.<sup>20</sup>

But unlike the rather Confucian-leaning approaches of Wang and his associates,<sup>21</sup> Huizong's venture was rooted strongly by the Daoist side of the contemporary religio-philosophical spectrum; therefore it could not have been based on the earlier reformers' less-impactful interpretations of the Daoist classics.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in order to "unify the Three Teachings 三教合一" of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism under Daoist guidance, the court first attempted to unify the various competing Daoisms of its time. Because the ongoing clashes of these Daoisms occurred on disparate socio-religious levels, the emperor and his aides had to implement different measures to tackle them. Exegetical literature was but one of these measures, and as discussed below, from all appearances primarily intended to appease and convert the scholarly elite. This becomes obvious particularly when the scope of application as well as the contents of the commentaries are compared with other, closely related projects that pertained to the religio-philosophical sphere.

#### EMPEROR HUIZONG'S DIVINE PURPOSE

One relatively well-researched project of Huizong was his patronage of the "Divine Empyrean" (*shenxiao* 神霄) movement that was introduced to the emperor by Lin Lingsu 林靈素 (d. ca. 1120). In one of their audiences, Lin recognized Huizong as a Daoist deity, the eldest son of the Jade Emperor (*yudi* 玉帝) – the Great Emperor of Long Life (*changsheng dadi* 長生大帝) who had been reincarnated to extend the rule of the *Dao* 道. This deity was simultaneously the sovereign of the Divine Empyrean – the highest region beyond the heavens reigning supreme over all lesser celestial spheres that had been revealed to

<sup>20</sup> See Yuan Zheng 袁征, *Songdai jiaoyu: Zhongguo gudai jiaoyu de lishixing zhuanzhe* 宋代教育, 中國古代教育的歷史性轉折 (Guangzhou: Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), pp. 37–43; Chu, *Politics of Higher Education*, chap. 5.

<sup>21</sup> That the rather syncretistic and politically-charged writings of Wang Anshi and his fellow reformers can be labeled "Confucian," or even "early Neo-Confucian," is debatable. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the pre-Huizong reform movement regarded those sources that had long been associated with Confucius or his teachings as superior and more authoritative than those of a Daoist or Buddhist nature.

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the earlier reformers did not leave commentaries on *Liezi* 列子, and most of their *Laozi* writings are no longer extant or survive only in fractions or abridged form; see Yan, *Lao Lie Zhuang sanzi zhi jian shumu* 1, pp. 81–87. Conversely, with the exceptions of a short essay collection by Li Shibiao 李士表 (fl. 1120), all known *Zhuangzi* commentaries from the Huizong era are lost; *ibid.* 2, pp. 80–81. Thus, any content-related comparison between these two sets of commentaries can only be superficial. Within the surviving literature, however, we find hardly any evidence that either Huizong or his followers used or even referred



the earlier Daoist traditions.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Lin's declaration had placed the emperor at the top of all lineages and branches of Daoism. Huizong gladly accepted the status and assumed the regnal name of August Emperor, Master of the Teachings, and Ruler through the *Dao* (*jiaozhu daojun huangdi* 教主道君皇帝).<sup>24</sup>

Subsequently, the emperor invested large sums to promote the newly revealed teachings, and many officials converted to the Divine Empyrean, ostensibly under imperial pressure.<sup>25</sup> An extensive network of temples was established to further spread the new ideology among the masses. Huizong even decreed that all existing Daoist, and several Buddhist, temples and monasteries were to be placed under the control of the Divine Empyrean clergy.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Lin Lingsu was invited to participate in the compilation of the first version of a Daoist canon to be produced in print, Huizong's *Longevity Daoist Canon of the Zhenghe Reign* (*Zhenghe wanshou daoang* 政和萬壽道藏),<sup>27</sup> and was likely responsible for the inclusion of the Divine Empyrean edition of the *Scripture of Salvation* (*Duren jing* 度人經). As its name suggests, this scripture is primarily soteriological and in many regards was a response to the Buddhist bodhisattva ideal, thus aiming for the salvation of all beings.<sup>28</sup> Under Huizong, the original version of the *Scripture of Salvation* in one *juan* 卷 was massively extended, resulting in a work of sixty-one *juan* titled *Wonderous Scripture of Supreme Rank on the Infinite Salvation of the Numinous Treasure* (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing* 靈寶無量度人上品妙經) that we now find heading the extant fifteenth-century *Daoist Canon of the Zhengtong Era* (*Zhengtong daoang* 正統道藏).<sup>29</sup> This edition of

---

to any of the Shenzong-era commentaries. Instead, their interpretations and rhetoric mostly relate to the heavily Madhyamaka-influenced "Twofold Mystery" (*chongxuan* 重玄) literature of the Tang era (see n. 118, below). See Richard J. Sage, "Late Northern Song Exegesis of the Daoist Classics: A Case Study Based on the *Zhuang Lie shi lun* 莊列十論," unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Hong Kong Baptist University, 2022), pp. 20–27, chaps. 2–3.

<sup>23</sup> See Michel Strickmann, "The Longest Taoist Scripture," in *History of Religions* 17.3–4 (1978), pp. 336–37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.; also Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, pp. 350–53.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>26</sup> See Chao Shin-yi, "Huizong and the Divine Empyrean Palace Temple Network," in Ebrey and Bickford, eds., *Song Huizong and Late Northern Song China*, pp. 338–58, Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, pp. 358–61.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding the production and fate of this canon, see Piet van der Loon, *Taoist Books in the Libraries of the Sung Period* (London: Ithaca P., 1984), pp. 39–50.

<sup>28</sup> An introduction to and annotated translation of the *Scripture of Salvation* are provided in Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1997), pp. 373–438; regarding its Buddhist influence and soteriological ideal, see pp. 385–92.

<sup>29</sup> *Zhengtong Daoang* 正統道藏 (Taipei: Yiwen chubanshe, 1962; hereafter DZ) 1. (Here and below, the preceding number is the identification number as indexed in Schipper & Verellen). Regarding the compilation of this canon and its relationship to Huizong's previous version, see *ibid.*, introduction, and van der Loon, *Taoist Books*, pp. 50–63.

the *Scripture of Salvation* is heavily imbued with Divine Empyrean ideology; it employs its terminology and conceptions, and thereby guides the initiated through distinct daily practices so as to attain salvation.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it frequently mentions “Great Emperor of Long Life,” linking Huizong’s divine persona to the salvatory mission of the new movement.<sup>31</sup> The importance of this act is further evinced by a later Divine Empyrean text preserved in the canon that serves as a quasi-appendix to this scripture – *Protocol of the Reception of the Scriptures of the Patriarch of the Highest Divine Empyrean* (*Gaoshang shenxiao zongshi shoujing shi* 高上神霄宗師受經式).<sup>32</sup> This protocol confirms that Huizong, the reincarnation of the Divine Empyrean deity, was meant to initiate his entire realm to the teachings and thereby guide all his subjects on the path to universal salvation.<sup>33</sup>

Traditional accounts mostly describe Lin Lingsu as an evil puppet master who obtained the favor of an incompetent ruler by feeding his religious delusions with revelations and magical tricks. Contemplating on this cooperation between state and religion with less historical bias, it resembles a partnership of convenience rather than a unidirectional exploitation. If anything, as Lin Lingsu’s quick fall from favor demonstrates, the decisive authority always remained with the imperial court. Although it will ultimately remain impossible to identify the driving force in this dynamic, the sudden appearance of the Divine Empyrean movement certainly happened at an opportune time for the emperor. The early-Song period saw the established Daoist traditions increasingly challenged by the growing influence of local movements and their gods.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, as the emperor must have realized, the established traditions themselves were not in agreement either. In 1108, for example, Huizong decreed a collection of rituals to be sent to every Daoist temple to ensure that the liturgy was performed according to the law. But another edict from only two years later shows the emperor’s

<sup>30</sup> See Strickmann, “Longest Taoist Scripture,” and John Lagerwey, “*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing*” 靈寶無量度人上品妙經, in Schipper & Verellen, pp. 1083–84.

<sup>31</sup> A cursory search resulted in 34 uses of the tem in the scripture, with *juan* 31 seeming dedicated to the deity’s doings.

<sup>32</sup> DZ 1282. See Kristofer Schipper and Yuan Bingling, “*Gaoshang shenxiao zongshi shoujing shi*” 高上神霄宗師受經式, in Schipper & Verellen, pp. 1085–86.

<sup>33</sup> See Strickmann, “Longest Taoist Scripture,” pp. 334–40.

<sup>34</sup> For further reading see Lowell Skar, “Ritual Movements, Deity Cults and the Transformation of Daoism in Song and Yuan Times,” in Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook: Handbook of Oriental Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 413–63; Robert Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2002); Matsumoto Kōichi 松本浩, “Daoism and Popular Religion in the Song,” in John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone, eds., *Modern Chinese Religion, I: Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan (960–1368 AD)*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 285–327.

lamenting about the fact that this collection had been met with contention and disagreements that led him to order one of his ministers to examine its contents and revise heterodoxies.<sup>35</sup>

Huizong's subsequent project to collect all available Daoist texts and create a new, codified, and officially recognized set of Daoist scriptures, that is his *Longevity Daoist Canon of the Zhenghe Reign*, was primarily aimed at integrating the various traditions and new movements under one unified vision.<sup>36</sup> When Lin appeared at court in 1115 or 1116,<sup>37</sup> this project had already been under way for several years.<sup>38</sup> But being recognized as the deity that sits atop the pyramid of all Daoist denominations and their teachings certainly bolstered Huizong's sacred authority and confidence in his undertaking to claim an all-embracing moral high ground in any religio-philosophical debate.<sup>39</sup>

Only a few years after his sudden rise to prominence, and shortly after the completion of the Daoist canon, Lin Lingsu lost the emperor's favor. By the end of 1119 he was sent away from the capital and is reported to have died soon thereafter. The Divine Empyrean ceremonies that had been instituted as well as the temple network, however, stayed intact. Wang Wenqing 王文卿 (1093–1153), who had earlier been introduced to the emperor by Lin, took over as main Divine Empyrean spokesperson at court. This may indicate that Huizong was indeed a naïve devotee who fell prey to the teachings of in some sense a charlatan and intended to continue imparting Divine Empyrean ideology to his empire despite the two men's falling out.<sup>40</sup> But it is likewise not

<sup>35</sup> See van der Loon, *Taoist Books*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> See Schipper & Verellen, pp. 635–36.

<sup>37</sup> Traditional sources differ as to the date Lin rose to prominence. Michel Strickmann and Patricia Ebrey both give 1116 throughout their works. Tang Daijian argues that it must have been 1115; see Tang Daijian 唐代劍, "Song shi: 'Lin Lingsu zhuan' buzheng" 宋史, "林靈素傳" 補正, in *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 1992.3, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> See van der Loon, *Taoist Books*, pp. 39–43.

<sup>39</sup> Within this context it must be stressed again that Huizong had closely been associated with Daoist masters and priests long before the arrival of Lin Lingsu. An important early influence on his studies of Daoist texts and practices was, e.g., Liu Hunkang 劉混康 (1035–1108). Despite his fading health, this patriarch of the Highest Clarity (*shangqing* 上清) lineage submitted to the emperor's third summons to the capital and, up until his death frequently exchanged letters with Huizong pertaining to various areas of the emperor's personal beliefs and religio-political intentions. Although Huizong continued a similar relationship with Liu's disciple Da Jingzhi 笮淨之 (1068–1113), he also sought advice from masters of various Daoist traditions, e.g., Zhang Jixian 張繼先 (1092–1126), 30th patriarch of the Celestial Master Daoists (*tianshi dao* 天師道) lineage; Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, pp. 133–49. It is worth noting that Huizong never unilaterally committed to just one of these traditions or attempted to install one as a state religion until the Divine Empyrean movement appeared and recognized him as de facto thearch.

<sup>40</sup> As assumed by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Emperor Huizong as a Daoist," in *Institute of Chinese Studies Visiting Professor Lecture Series* 3 (2013), p. 85; *Emperor Huizong*, pp. 367–71.

too far-fetched to assume that Lin Lingsu was only needed to give the imperial court a tool to satisfy its autocratic tendencies and claim divine legitimacy for their far-reaching projects. When the canon, the ceremonies, and the temple network were established, he may simply have outlived his usefulness and did no longer merit protection from the power struggles at court. Furthermore, Wang Wenqing, Lin's logical successor in ritual matters as well as in the production of convenient revelations, was already at hand.<sup>41</sup> As always, the truth presumably lies somewhere in the middle as it is certain that both parties, imperial court and Divine Emphyrean movement, profited from this cooperation.

#### DAOIST EXEGETICAL LITERATURE WITHIN THE IMPERIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Given the above contexts, the exegetical literature produced by Huizong and his subordinates at around this time takes an intriguing position. Regardless of whether the emperor and his courtiers were devoted practitioners or were simply using the movement, one should expect their interpretations of the classics to carry a strong Divine Emphyrean undertone. However, explicit references to that ideology are absent within the surviving commentaries on the classics.<sup>42</sup> This partly reflects the nature of the source material, which is philosophical rather than ritualist, and was written for the private, individual reader rather than for a religious community. But it also suggests that the authors deliberately adjusted their vocabulary to cater to another different audience. The classics and their imperial reinterpretations were not intended to be used in liturgy. Instead, they were to be employed within the imperial school system with the purpose of creating a new

---

Yet, as Ari Daniel Levine cautions (citing Ebrey's words): "today's reader may wonder how much of what Huizong did was a public performance, scripted by officials, and how much reflected his personal feelings." See Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, p. xvi; Levine, "Review of *Emperor Huizong*, by Patricia Buckley Ebrey," in *American Historical Review* 120.2 (2015), p. 592.

<sup>41</sup> Wang Wenqing is the purported author of numerous instructions pertaining to performing of the Thunder Rituals (*leifa* 雷法) that survived in the Daoist canon; see Grégoire Espeset, "Wang Wenqing 王文卿," in Fabrizio Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 1017. Indeed, Patricia Ebrey refers to an anecdote that claims Wang's ritual expertise fixed Lin Lingsu's initially fruitless attempt to curb a flood and contributed thus to Lin's fall from favor; see idem, *Emperor Huizong*, p. 367. More important for the present paper is that Wang is possibly the author of *Talismans and Diagrams of the Wonderful Scripture of Supreme Rank on the Infinite Salvation of the Numinous Treasure* (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangbin miaojing futu* 靈寶無量度人經上品妙經符圖; DZ 147), to which was written a preface composed by Huizong's divine persona (discussed below, in main text at n. 83). See also Strickmann, "Longest Taoist Scripture," pp. 345-46.

<sup>42</sup> This has already been noted by Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, p. 364.

type of scholar official, educated in the Daoist classics, indoctrinated in Huizong's self-glorifying ideology, and thus faithful to his vision of a "daocratic" empire.

In 1116, Huizong ordered the establishment of Daoist schools which were officially integrated into the state-run school system in 1118. Its curriculum included *Laozi*, *The Inner Scripture of the Yellow Thearch* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經), *Zhuangzi*, and *Liezi* 列子. Furthermore, for each of these classics, two erudite (*boshi* 博士) positions were created in the Imperial Academy, its preparatory branches, and in every county school. Daoist officials emerging from this education system were given comparable ranks to those in the civil system and were granted handsome career opportunities.<sup>43</sup>

The inclusion of the *Inner Scripture of the Yellow Thearch*, a work on medicine, is often attributed to the emperor's interest in therapeutic practices but also had practical reasons: employment for graduates could be found within the Divine Empyrean temple network, which had as a main purpose the medical support of local peoples.<sup>44</sup> But why were the three Daoist classics chosen over any of the central scriptures of the Divine Empyrean corpus?<sup>45</sup> Most likely because the primary purpose of the Daoist schools was not to prepare the already initiated practitioner for priesthood, but to convince the literati class of the advantages of Huizong's vision of the Three Teachings unified under Daoist guidance.

Besides these four Daoist texts, the schools also instructed their students in the *Mengzi* 孟子 classic and the *Classic of Changes* (*Yi jing* 易經). Since its canonization during the Han, the *Changes* was most often regarded as Confucian, but, of course, it had a deep and lasting influence on all Daoist traditions as well. *Mengzi* may have simply been included because of the emperor's personal likings. In his commentaries on the Daoist classics, Huizong frequently cites both the *Changes* and *Mengzi*, indicating that he was if not fond of then at least well-versed in them. Moreover, the *Mengzi* text seems to have been Wang Anshi's favorite classic and it came to serve as a certain kind of symbol within the power struggle between the reformers and their opposition.<sup>46</sup> Thus,

<sup>43</sup> See Chao Shin-yi, "Daoist Examinations and Daoist Schools during the Northern Song Dynasty," in *Journal of Chinese Religions* 31.1 (2003), pp. 20–24, and Ebrey, "Emperor Huizong as a Daoist," pp. 80–81.

<sup>44</sup> See Chao, "Daoist Examinations," p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> A notable absence was that of the *Scripture of Salvation*, mostly because it received a commentary by Huizong and an imperially authorized reading by his high-ranking minister Fan Zhixu; see van der Loon, *Taoist Books*, p. 134. Both works are now lost.

<sup>46</sup> See Chu, *Politics of Higher Education*, p. 180.

as Shin-yi Chao speculates, by choosing *Mengzi* over the other classics, Huizong may again have clarified his position alongside the reform movement.<sup>47</sup>

But regardless of the exact reasons to decide on specifically these two texts, their mere inclusion into the curriculum of dedicated Daoist schools reveals much about the potential studentship and the target audience of imperial commentaries. To win over to his projects scholar-officials from within the entire religio-philosophical spectrum, Huizong repeatedly emphasized the common origins of all teachings.<sup>48</sup> Having the *Changes* and *Mengzi* within the curriculum of the schools made it easier for scholars within the regular track to transfer into the Daoist school system. They were already familiar with these texts and their reinterpretations by the reform faction were easily available. Further incentives for the more opportunistic students to change tracks were the alleged favoritism towards Daoist scholars after graduation and easier examinations compared to the regular school system.<sup>49</sup> School registers and anecdotal evidence suggest that these tactics may have been rather successful.<sup>50</sup> But for yet unexplored reasons, the schools were only short lived: they were abolished in 1120.<sup>51</sup>

Nonetheless, the Daoist classics that were placed in their curriculum, including their officially recognized interpretations, continued to be circulated within the imperial school system. This is, *inter alia*, attested by an edict from 1123 in which Huizong decreed that the Directorate of Education (Guozhi jian 國子監) distribute his own elaborations on the Daoist classic *Liezi* among the scholars within the Directorate.<sup>52</sup> This indicates that the imperially authorized commentaries were still intended to set the standard for teaching even after the closure of the specialized schools. And the comparatively high number of commentaries from this period authored by scholars and officials suggests that the efforts to popularize the Daoist classics among the literati elite bore

<sup>47</sup> See Chao, "Daoist Examinations," p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> See Ebrey, "Emperor Huizong as a Daoist," p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> See Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, p. 361.

<sup>50</sup> See Chao, "Daoist Examinations," pp. 23–24.

<sup>51</sup> See Yan Yongcheng 燕永成, ed., *Huang Song shi chao gangyao jiaozheng* 皇宋十朝綱要校正 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), p. 513. Because the dates of establishment and abolishment of the Daoist schools coincide with the arrival and dismissal of Lin Lingsu, this project of the emperor has often been linked to Lin; see, e.g., Chau, "Daoist Examinations," pp. 24–25; and Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, p. 367. But if it was indeed Lin who instigated the creation of these schools and decided upon the curriculum, the absence of Divine Empyrean teachings within it becomes somewhat suspicious.

<sup>52</sup> See Yuan, *Songdai jiaoyu*, p. 43.

fruit. Besides Huizong's own writings on *Laozi* and *Liezi*, five directly related works have survived within the Daoist canon: Zhang An's 章安 (fl. ca. 1120) and Jiang Cheng's 江澂 (fl. ca. 1120) subcommentaries to Huizong's *Laozi*,<sup>53</sup> Fan Zhixu's 范致虛 (d. 1129) subcommentary to the emperor's *Liezi*,<sup>54</sup> Jiang Yu's 江適 (fl. ca. 1120) reading of the *Liezi*,<sup>55</sup> and Li Shibiao's 李士表 (fl. 1120) *Ten Essays on Zhuangzi and Liezi* (*Zhuang Lie shi lun* 莊列十論).<sup>56</sup> At the time during which they wrote, Zhang An was court gentleman for promoted service (*dengshi lang* 登仕郎), Jiang Cheng was a student at the Imperial Academy (Taixue *sheng* 太學生), Jiang Yu was a scholar in the Inner College of the Provincial College of Hangzhou (Hangzhou *zhouxue neishesheng* 杭州州學內舍生), and Li Shibiao was an instructor 教授 at the Imperial Academy. Fan Zhixu, by far the most prominent figure among these authors was Huizong's assistant director to the left in the Department of State Affairs (Shangshu *sheng zuocheng* 尚書省左丞) and thus among the highest-ranking officials of his time. Another *Liezi* commentary, written during the reign of Huizong, is now lost; it was by Sun E 孫鶚 (?), a remonstrator to the left (*zuo sijian* 左司諫).<sup>57</sup> Moreover, we know that the emperor composed a *Zhuangzi* commentary, which is now lost.<sup>58</sup> It appears reasonable to assume that this work likewise elicited subcommentaries.<sup>59</sup> Hui-

<sup>53</sup> DZ 681 and DZ 694, respectively.

<sup>54</sup> Included in Gao Shouyuan's 高守元 (fl. 1189) compilation (DZ 732).

<sup>55</sup> DZ 730.

<sup>56</sup> DZ 1263.

<sup>57</sup> See Yan, *Lao Lie Zhuang sanzhi zhi jian shumu*, 2, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Mentioned by Huizong himself in the preface to his *Liezi* commentary; see my translation, below, main text.

<sup>59</sup> Note that although Huizong's endeavors resulted in an increase of Daoist exegetical writings, the exact circumstances under which these were composed, their purposes, and their possible interconnections need further investigation. Unfortunately, several of these commentaries cannot be precisely dated. Neither does *Song shi* nor earlier historiographical accounts (e.g., *Huang Song shichao gangyao* 皇宋十朝綱要, *Huangchao biannian gangmu beiyao* 皇朝編年綱目備要, etc.) contain useful information on any of the authors other than Fan Zhixu. Any analysis of all these exegeses must rely on a close-reading of each and a subsequent intertextual comparison – a task beyond our scope here. Nonetheless, simply to summarize my reading so far, it seems the *Laozi* subcommentaries by Zhang An and Jiang Cheng, e.g., are not only concerned to supply added explanations, but foremost to confirm Huizong's exegetical views. They leave the impression of being written by students eager to advance their careers. Fan Zhixu's *Liezi* subcommentary is an entirely different beast. Unlike the other works just mentioned, it appears to have been commissioned by the emperor himself and played a more integral role in the emperor's attempt to gain support from scholars of the imperial school system. Fan, a member of the upper echelons of government and a well-respected Daoist scholar, was tasked with making Huizong's readings of the classics more acceptable for the literati elite; see Sage, "We Don't Need No (Confucian) Education!"; In Li Shibiao's *Ten Essays*, on the other hand, we encounter a potential critique of the emperor's and Fan Zhixu's readings, indicating that not all scholars were easily swayed by their Daoist propaganda; Sage, "Late Northern Song Exegesis," chap. 3.

zong further authored and authorized official commentaries on several scriptures more clearly associated with religious communities and their practices, namely the *Scripture of Western Ascension* (*Xisheng jing* 西昇經) and the *Scripture of Salvation*.<sup>60</sup> Again, unlike the more philosophical classics, these texts and their exegeses were not imposed upon the students at the Daoist schools.

#### HUIZONG'S READINGS OF THE DAOIST CLASSICS AND SCRIPTURES

The imperial commentaries are valuable primary sources, informing us about the type of Daoism the emperor envisioned and how he desired to style himself within this vision, be that either deliberately or subconsciously. Naturally, the production of any imperial commentary is likely to have been a team effort that brought together various of his advisors and court officials, or even entirely done by ghost-writers. But these latter would hardly have made final decisions without consulting the ruler, particularly one as concerned with his public persona as Huizong.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the writing style and authorial voice throughout most surviving commentaries of the emperor are strikingly coherent. Thus, even if the commentaries were composed by proxy, Huizong certainly had a clear picture of what he expected and what deserved his seal of approval.

From among the extant works, the emperor's commentary on *Laozi* has the most overt political touch. Like many others, Huizong read the work as a handbook for the ruler, namely himself.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, his explanations and annotations oftentimes have a practical and even personal touch. This indicates that it was likely no literary *éminence grise* but Huizong himself who authored the work, or at least arranged for its composition.<sup>63</sup> A good example for this can be found in the emperor's explanation to *Laozi*, section 20:

<sup>60</sup> DZ 666 and DZ 147, respectively.

<sup>61</sup> See also Liu, *On the Art of Ruling a Big Country*, pp. 2–3. Regarding Huizong's attempts to shape his public image through his artwork and stele inscriptions, see Maggie Bickford "Huizong's Paintings: Art and the Art of Emperorship," in Ebrey and Bickford, eds., *Song Huizong and Northern Song China*, pp. 453–513, and Ebrey, "Huizong's Stone Inscriptions," *ibid.*, pp. 229–74.

<sup>62</sup> Liu Ts'un-yan provides a more detailed analysis of the emperor's reading which reaffirms this impression; Liu, "Daozang ben san sheng zhu Daode jing huijian jia pian" and "Daozang ben san sheng zhu Daode jing huijian yi pian."

<sup>63</sup> Or that various advisers were particularly cunning experts in public relations.



[*Laozi*:] How far apart are “yes” and “yeah”?<sup>64</sup> How different are “good” and “evil”? What the people fear, one must fear [as well]. 唯之與阿，相去幾何？善之與惡，相去何若？人之所畏，不可不畏。

Imperial Commentary: *Yes* and *yeah* are of the same sound, *good* and *evil* are by nature uniform. [Only] those of little wisdom and selfishness separate them and create such dichotomies. But distinguished people with great insight [realize that] in the most fundamental reality, there is no difference [between them]. 御注曰：唯阿同聲，善惡一性，小智自私，離而爲二，達人大觀，本實非異。

When the sage manages mundane [affairs] at the imperial court and discusses with his senior officials, things are not as evened out as this. [We] restrain the evil and praise the good, worrying only that it may not succeed, for “what the people fear, one must fear [as well].” 聖人之經世，在宗廟朝廷，與大夫言，不齊如此，遏惡揚善，惟恐不至，“人之所畏，不可不畏”故也。

That which “rouses the myriad things without having the same anguish as sages” is the *Dao*.<sup>65</sup> That in which [We] “share the same concerns about fortune or misfortune as the common people”<sup>66</sup> are the state affairs. Embodying the *Dao*, one is without sorrow. But in being involved in state affairs, one is fearful. “鼓萬物而不與聖人同憂”者，道也。“吉凶與民同患”者，事也。體道者無憂，涉事者有畏。<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Laozi* commentators and translators alike are divided regarding how to interpret the *wei* 唯 and *e* 阿 coupling. They either are sounds signifying affirmative responses on two different levels of politeness based on the conversation partners' relative social status (“yes” and “yeah”) or, if *e* 阿 is taken as variant of *he* 訶 (“to scold”), it results in an affirmative (“yay”) and a negative (“nay”) response; see Ch'en Ku-ying 陳鼓應, *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子註譯及評介 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 141. Huizong's exegetical comment, that they are of the “same sound” (*tong sheng* 同聲), suggests that he followed the first-mentioned interpretation, as does Wan Manlu 萬曼璐 in his modern edition of the commentary; Wan, *Song Huizong Daode zhenjing jiyi*, p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Cited from the pre-Han “Great Commentary” (“Da zhuan” 大傳) that was attached to the *Changes* text in the early-Han era; see Fu Yijian 傅以漸 (1609–65), *Yi jing tongzhu* 易經通注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 105. Said passage describes the *Dao*, here better translated as “course,” as successive alternations of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 (i.e., active and passive processes) that can only be recognized and predicted by sages, but ultimately remain even beyond their control. For an insightful introduction to the “Great Commentary,” see Willard J. Peterson, “Making Connections: ‘Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations’ of the *Book of Change*,” in *HJAS* 42.1 (1982), pp. 67–116.

<sup>66</sup> Likewise referring to the *Great Commentary*, see Fu, *Yi jing tongzhu*, p. 114. This passage continues to describe the sages' ability to predict events according to the patterns they recognize in the ever-lasting process of “change” (*yi* 易). Here, sages, in so doing, “share the same concerns about fortune and misfortune as the common people 吉凶與民同患,” but unlike them, they gain their understanding through their *shen* 神 (神以知來). Within the *Great Commentary*, *shen* is better understood as “spirit-like abilities.” But by reflecting this passage upon himself, Huizong may well have interpreted it as his own “divineness” that allows him deeper understanding of the workings of the *Dao*.

<sup>67</sup> Wan, *Song Huizong Daode zhenjing jiyi*, pp. 73–74. Here, the sequence of passages has been

Zhang An's subcommentary further clarifies:

[When one adheres to the ideal of] non-purposive action and embodies the *Dao*, [when one] has forgotten both things and self, how could there be any sorrow and apprehension? 無爲體道，物我兩忘，何憂懼之有？

But when one is involved in the traces of managing mundane [affairs] then one is subject to the same concerns as the people when it comes to good and ill luck. Therefore, [pondering upon the saying] “what the people fear, one must fear [as well],” [the emperor clarifies] that he does not differentiate himself from the commoner, but that he shares the same sorrows and joys with the people. 涉經世之迹，則吉凶同患於民。則“人之所畏，不可不畏”者，不自異於人，而憂樂與民同之也。<sup>68</sup>

Just these small paragraphs already display several of the main concerns displayed throughout Huizong's writings. Judging from the rest of Huizong's commentary, and apart from the rather docile confirmation that the emperor identified himself with the common people, Zhang's explanations here are spot-on. The term “sage” (*sheng ren* 聖人) within this context specifically indicates the sage-ruler. And following in the tradition of previous emperors, Huizong, the “August Emperor, Master of the Teachings, and Ruler through the *Dao*,” clearly laid claim to this title as well. Hence, this passage gives a rather intimate account of the emperor's struggles to balance the ideal of the sage-ruler, who “embodies the *Dao* 體道” and governs through “non-purposive action 無爲,” with the realities of day-to-day politics.

Huizong's solution is to differentiate between the sacred and the mundane when it comes to practical administrative matters.<sup>69</sup> This again illustrates that the emperor was not a mere religious fanatic but concerned with the actual processes of policymaking and handling the imperial court. And it further demonstrates an awareness that he wrote for a variegated target-audience. His commentary to the *Laozi* is deliberately written for scholars concerned with court politics rather than celestial realms. He presents himself as someone who, despite his profound insights into the workings of the *Dao*, understands the struggles of the mundane world.

---

slightly rearranged for the sake of clarity. All translations in this paper are by the author.

<sup>68</sup> Wan, *Song Huizong Daode zhenjing jieyi*, p. 74.

<sup>69</sup> See also Liu, *On the Art of Ruling a Big Country*, pp. 15–16.

Significant within this context is Huizong's slightly different approach towards the *Scripture of Western Ascension*, which he describes as complementary to the *Laozi*.<sup>70</sup> In the preface to his version of that work, the emperor states:

For the [*Scripture of Western Ascension*] the essential wonder lies within attaining oneness. Ascending heavenwards<sup>71</sup> is only of secondary importance. This is because its intention is to guide future generations on their path towards the realm of the wonderous root, of being free and unfettered and self-complacent.<sup>72</sup> Here, the merits in its promotion of salvation become obvious.<sup>73</sup>

In times of leisure, away from the myriad state affairs, We [the emperor]<sup>74</sup> have sent the spirit on journeys within the *Great Clarity*. And in accordance with the pointers given in “Dao” and “Potency” (that is, the two titled parts of the *Laozi* text), [We] touched upon its intention there on each occasion. Since [We] have already adopted the “Two Chapters” (again, “Dao” and “Potency”) and composed instructions and explanations according to them, it would be impossible not to expound upon this scripture as well.

以得一爲要妙，以飛昇爲餘事。其意蓋使天下後世徑趨妙本、逍遙、自得之場故也。善救之功，於此可見。朕萬機之暇，遊神太清，於道德之旨，每著意焉，既取二篇爲之訓解，於是書不可無述也。<sup>75</sup>

The *Scripture of Western Ascension* and the *Laozi* are primarily related by their origin stories. According to an early legend, Yin Xi 尹

<sup>70</sup> See DZ 666, p. 1a-b.

<sup>71</sup> I.e., becoming immortal.

<sup>72</sup> The “wonderous root 妙本” is an allusion to the *Dao*, that unfathomable origin of and guiding principle for all existence. “Being free and unfettered 逍遙” refers to the title of *Zhuangzi*, chap. 1. A.C. Graham summarized the chapter's theme as “...soaring above the restricted viewpoints of the worldly. Escape the fixed routes to worldly success and fame, defy all reproaches that are useless, selfish, indifferent to the good of the Empire, and a perspective opens from which all ordinary ambitions are seen as negligible, the journey of life becomes an effortless ramble.” Angus C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (1981; rev. edn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), p. 43.

Within the context of the mystical contemplation described in the *Scripture of Western Ascension*, the term *zide* 自得 (“self-complacent”) likely refers to Guo Xiang's 郭象 (d. 312) *Zhuangzi* commentary in which Guo describes a person who went into a trance-like state that enabled him to leave his self behind (“I have lost my self 吾喪我”); see Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–96), *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (1961; rev. edn. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), pp. 49–50.

<sup>73</sup> I.e., for Huizong, mystical self-divinization leads to genuine salvation (in a sense, attainment of oneness) rather than the quest for immortality.

<sup>74</sup> Grammatically speaking, *zhen* 朕 is, of course, a singular pronoun and commonly translated simply as “I.” However, it was reserved for use solely by a ruler and therefore inherently implies the authors' superiority over their audience. In this regard, its closest equivalent in English is the royal “We,” and it is rendered as such throughout this paper.

<sup>75</sup> DZ 666, p. 1a-b.

喜, the guardian of Hangu Pass 函谷關 stopped the “Old Master,” Laozi 老子, on his way towards the West; and only on his request, the Master composed his eponymous work.<sup>76</sup> The framework narrative of the *Scripture of Western Ascension* picks up on this story and describes how the guardian became a disciple of the Old Master and active practitioner of his teachings.<sup>77</sup> The oral instructions he received from the Old Master before the latter finally “ascended to the West” eventually were passed on in form of the *Scripture of Western Ascension*.<sup>78</sup>

Whereas the *Laozi* classic functioned as Huizong’s guidebook for day-to-day politics, he reserved works more focused on contemplative practices and soteriological concerns like the *Scripture of Western Ascension* for his “leisure time, away from the myriad state affairs.”<sup>79</sup> Having taken a closer look at the quote from the preface, the emperor’s own exalted status within the Daoist pantheon is indicated even more clearly than in his explanations on the more philosophical works where he styles himself as “mere” sage. Evidently, Huizong saw himself in the position of lecturing the world according to his mystic experiences. He achieved the state of “Great Clarity” (*tai qing* 太清), which in the text of *Zhuangzi* denotes the mental state of an enlightened adept, a “perfected person” (*zhi ren* 至人).<sup>80</sup> The *Scripture of Western Ascension* combined with his own explanations that were dictated to him within the celestial realm, potentially by the *Dao* itself, are meant to guide his subjects on the path towards salvation.<sup>81</sup> The emperor considers his own soteriological epiphanies as prerequisite for his empire’s well-being, and himself as a “perfected” Daoist adept.

<sup>76</sup> See Sima Qian 司馬遷 (d. 86 BC), *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 63, pp. 2139–43.

<sup>77</sup> See Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>78</sup> The authority of the *Scripture of Western Ascension* relied not only on its connection to the Old Master, Laozi, but also Yin Xi, who started his own career within the Daoist pantheon. For an overview regarding the gradual deification of this figure and its importance for various Daoist movements and traditions, see Judith M. Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature: Tenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, U. California, 1987), pp. 124–28; Livia Kohn, “Yin Xi: The Master at the Beginning of the Scripture,” in *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25.1 (1997), pp. 83–139.

<sup>79</sup> From his communication with the Daoist master Liu Hunkang, we know that Huizong was well versed in other works primarily concerned with meditation and visualization practices, e.g., *Scripture of Clarity and Tranquility* (*Qingjing jing* 清靜經) and *Genuine Scripture of the Great Cavern* (*Dadong zhenjing* 大洞真經). In an act not uncommon among lay practitioners, he personally wrote out transcriptions of these and other Daoist texts and offered them to Liu; see Ebrey, “Emperor Huizong as a Daoist,” pp. 52–58.

<sup>80</sup> See Guo, *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1042.

<sup>81</sup> See also Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy*, pp. 30–33.

When read cynically, and especially against the background of the Divine Empyrean revelations, Huizong's introduction and commentary are akin to a humblebrag: he is the reincarnation of a deity from the highest celestial realm and as such has insight into the most intricate workings of the *Dao*, which on his spiritual journey communicates with himself directly. Yet, he decides to reside within the mundane world and attend to his duties as sage-ruler so that he can guide all his subjects towards salvation. Ultimately, he assumes a bodhisattva-esque, messianic position which indeed corresponds to the revelations.<sup>82</sup> With that in mind, the Buddhists' use of "expedient means 方便 (Skt: *upāya*)" may have been a source of inspiration for the deliberate changes in tone and content appropriate to his shifting target audiences.

Within this context, another text ascribed to Huizong must be mentioned – the preface of *Talismans and Diagrams of the Wonderous Scripture of Supreme Rank on the Infinite Salvation of the Numinous Treasure* (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing futu* 靈寶無量度人經上品妙經符圖).<sup>83</sup> The main work is a commentary on the original one-chapter version of the *Scripture of Salvation* and, although written after the dismissal of Lin Lingsu, belongs clearly to the Divine Empyrean tradition.<sup>84</sup> Remarkably, the tone and style of the preface are vastly different from those of the emperor's commentaries, described above. It is neither signed nor dated, and an intriguing contrast is the use of the personal pronoun "I 我" instead of the imperial "We 朕."<sup>85</sup> These details cause John Lagerwey and Michel Strickmann to doubt the attribution to Huizong.<sup>86</sup> Yet, one of the latter's passing remarks deserves attention. Strickmann states that the preface "though attributed to the emperor himself, was certainly written by no mere mortal, and if Huizong was its author then he spoke through his empyrean persona."<sup>87</sup> This is precisely the nub of the matter. Because Strickmann acknowledges that "the language of this preface, though exalted, is no more extreme than that found in the emperor's own decree announcing his divine mission,"<sup>88</sup> this shift in the author's voice does by no means indicate that the preface was

<sup>82</sup> Regarding Huizong's messianic position within the revelations, see Strickmann, "Longest Taoist Scripture," p. 335; also Boltz, *Survey of Taoist Literature*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>83</sup> DZ 147.

<sup>84</sup> See Boltz, *Survey of Taoist Literature*, p. 27.

<sup>85</sup> See DZ 147, preface pp. 1b, 2a. Regarding the translation of *zhen* 朕 as the royal "We," see n. 74, above.

<sup>86</sup> See Strickmann, "Longest Taoist Scripture," p. 344, and John Lagerwey, "*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing futu*" 靈寶無量度人上品妙經符圖, in Schipper & Verellen, p. 1084.

<sup>87</sup> Strickmann, "Longest Taoist Scripture," p. 344.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345, n. 37.

wrongly attributed to Huizong. It rather exemplifies the emperor's differentiated approach, as seen in his treatment of ostensibly religious scriptures in comparison with that of the more philosophical classics, and their respective readerships.

The contents of the preface reconfirm Huizong's status as deity and his mission to guide humanity towards salvation. The text states that "heretical doctrines will be exterminated 邪法消蕩" after the deity's arrival in the mundane world.<sup>89</sup> The scholars just mentioned take this as a reference to Huizong's short-lived attempt to curb Buddhism,<sup>90</sup> but it might likewise be aimed at any tradition or new movement that was not under control of the court's thearchy. Unfortunately, only the preface to the *Talismans and Diagrams* related to the *Scripture of Salvation* survived. The commentaries on the *Scripture of Salvation* itself that were written or authorized by the emperor can no longer be investigated.<sup>91</sup> There thus cannot be further testimony for, or against, the emperor's actual belief in these revelations and his divine purpose provided by his own authorial voice. Given the preface alone and its stark contrast to the works on the classics that were officially authorized by Huizong, it would appear to confirm the emperor's deliberate use of "expedient means" rather than his blind devotion to the Divine Emphyrean teachings. If this preface was indeed approved or even composed by Huizong, it was certainly meant to be read by a practitioner as introductory remarks before using the charts and diagrams of the commentary in a liturgy. For this audience and application, the emperor did not need to present himself as a sage-ruler with superior morality, but instead imbue the text with his divine authority, especially regarding Daoist ritual practices.

Compared with the lofty tone of the deity that speaks to us in the preface just discussed, Huizong's authorial voice and message throughout the other extant commentaries appear rather unimposing. This is particularly the case within his explanations concerning the text of *Liezi*. The preface of the *Scripture of Western Ascension* still indicates that the emperor saw himself as the divine medium who instructs the people according to his mystic experiences. But within the preface of

<sup>89</sup> DZ 147, preface, p. 2a.

<sup>90</sup> See Strickmann, "Longest Taoist Scripture," pp. 344-46; Boltz, *Survey of Taoist Literature*, pp. 26-27; and Lagerwey, "*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing futu*," p. 1084.

<sup>91</sup> We know that the emperor wrote a commentary, commissioned Fan Zhixu to compose one, and authorized a collection of commentaries; see van der Loon, *Taoist Books*, p. 134, and Boltz, *Survey of Taoist Literature*, pp. 208, 328-29 (n. 577).

his *Liezi* commentary, he concedes this role to the namesake of the work, Master Lie:<sup>92</sup>

The *Dao* acts upon all the myriad things, but things [themselves] are [constrained by preconceptions],<sup>93</sup> [so much so that] the mundane people do not see the *Dao* [anymore] when they look upon things. When sages look upon things, however, for them, there is nothing but the *Dao*. With genuineness and artifice established, [people] separate dreams from waking consciousness; with existence and non-existence disputed, [people] differentiate between past and present.<sup>94</sup> 道行于萬物，物囿於一曲，世之人見物而不見道，聖人則見物之無非道者。真僞立而夢覺分，有無辯而古今異。

Achievements are not based on wisdom, neither are mistakes based on ignorance. Instead, the disparity between failure and success is generated by the incongruence of endeavor and fate.<sup>95</sup> 得者不以智，失者不以愚，而窮達之差生于力命之不對。

Egoists abandon humaneness, altruists abandon propriety, and therefore the sayings of Yang Zhu and Mo Di are ridiculed by scholars of great expertise.<sup>96</sup> 爲我者廢仁，爲人者廢義，而楊朱、墨翟之言見笑於大方之家。

Sir Master Lie is on the verge of obscuring genuineness and artifice and forgetting them both, of merging existence and non-existence into a single unity, and entrusting attainment and loss, failure and success entirely upon the spontaneous.<sup>97</sup> 子列子方且冥真僞而兩忘，會有無於一致，得喪窮達，付之自爾。

<sup>92</sup> DZ 732, j.1, pp. 7b-8b. Huizong's *Liezi* commentary is cited from Gao Shouyuan's compilation because its stand-alone version found in DZ 731 is fragmentary.

<sup>93</sup> The expression *yi qu* 一曲, lit. "one-sided," implies that someone bases judgements purely on preconceived opinions.

<sup>94</sup> Besides the obvious critique on dualistic thinking patterns and the allusion to the illusory nature of existence, Huizong here summarizes the main themes discussed in *Liezi* chap. 3, "Zhou Mu wang" 周穆王.

<sup>95</sup> A summary of the theme of *Liezi* chap. "Li ming" 力命 ("Endeavor and Fate"), which displays a radical, fatalistic view that essentially denies any freedom of choice, any possible impact of one's endeavor on one's fate.

<sup>96</sup> Mo Di's 墨翟 (ca. 470-391 BC) teachings were based on the assumption that everyone is equal and his concept of "inclusive care," or "universal love" (*jian ai* 兼愛), stood in stark contrast to the Confucian idea that the degree to which one is concerned for an other varies according to the relative statuses. Yang Zhu 楊朱 (ca. 440-360 BC), on the other hand, is commonly taken as the prime example of an egoist who places self-preservation over the interests of the realm. The *Liezi*'s chap. 7 is dedicated to Yang and presents a slightly deradicalized version of his teachings. Whether *Liezi* ridicules his ideas, however, is debatable. The notion that one is free to strive for one's own advantages may well be borne by the fatalist idea found in *Liezi* chap. 6: if one's ultimate fate is neither knowable nor escapable, one might also just follow one's own natural inclinations.

<sup>97</sup> I.e., the spontaneous processes and transformations instigated by the *Dao*.

[Yang Zhu's] egoism and [Mo Di's] inclusive care both communicate political utopias and show deep sympathy for the people who lost their ways. But they [only] see the advantages and forget the truth behind them,<sup>98</sup> just like the one who turns into a thief [without understanding the meaning of the word], or the one who snatches the gold [without noticing the merchant].<sup>99</sup> They are lost without returning, they are galloping ahead without turning back. 爲我兼愛，通於大同，而深憫斯民之迷。見利而忘其真，如彼爲盜，如彼攫金，迷而不反，馳而不顧。

Hence, [Master Lie] composed this book in eight chapters to clarify that the spirit of the wonderful thing goes forth and back solitarily, beyond the boundaries of model [forms],<sup>100</sup> and that the ever-victorious path lies within keeping the rear and guarding the softness within undisputed grounds.<sup>101</sup> He talks boundless and without restraint, borrows from external theories,<sup>102</sup> and puts words into the mouths of the Yellow Thearch and Master Kong. 故著書八篇，以明妙物之神獨往獨來于範圍之外，而常勝之道持後守柔於不爭之地。其說汪洋大肆，籍外之論，託言於黃帝、孔子。

The very essence of his work can entirely be traced back to the pointers given in “Dao” and “Potency.” After he examined the

<sup>98</sup> The “truth 真” means, of course, that from the perspective of the *Dao*, or of those who attain a mystical unity with it, to adhere to mundane ideals, be they “good” or “bad,” is meaningless.

<sup>99</sup> These two examples allude to the last anecdotes in the first and last chapters of *Liezi*, respectively. The first anecdote describes the mere act of living as “thievery” because one separates a part, that is oneself, from the cosmic unity as a whole; see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 (1979; rev. edn. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), pp. 35–38. The latter anecdote depicts how complete fixation on a single goal can lead to ignorance of negative consequences; see Yang, *Liezi jishi*, p. 273.

<sup>100</sup> “The spirit of the wonderful thing 妙物之神” is another allusion to the *Dao* and its workings. “Solitarily 獨” likewise is an adverb describing the transcendent *Dao*, which alone is beyond mundane dichotomies. This is best illustrated in an essay by one of Huizong’s immediate subjects, Li Shibiao:

When there is oneness, there is no dichotomy, and it solitarily goes forth, solitarily goes back, being without either past or present. When there is duality, there is a counterpart, and they shape each other, oppose each other, arise and cease in consequence of the other. 一則無二，故獨往獨來而無古無今。對則有耦，故相形相傾而隨起隨滅 (DZ 1263, p. 5b).

<sup>101</sup> Alluding to the idea that by “Keeping to the rear, you will find yourself ahead 持後而處先” (*Liezi* chap. “Shuo fu” 說符), see Yang, *Liezi jishi*, pp. 239–42. “Guarding softness 受柔” is associated with *Laozi* rather than the text of *Liezi*, but already *Huainanzi* 淮南子 mentions the two concepts together, citing both the Old Master and Master Lie; see He Ning 何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), p. 746.

<sup>102</sup> On *Zhuangzi*’s rhetorical strategies expounded in its chap. “Yu yan” 寓言, see Guo, *Zhuangzi jishi*, pp. 939–42, and regarding how it is reminiscent of Zhuang Zhou’s teachings in the “Tian xia” 天下 chapter, see Guo, *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 1091. As per Li Shibiao’s essay on “Tian xia,” contemporary commentators on the Daoist classics often regarded *Zhuangzi*’s rhetoric as a sign of refined understanding of the *Dao*, not simply “preposterous”; see DZ 1263, p. 18b.



sayings of these [two parts of the text of *Laozi*], probed into their intentions, and investigated what they created, he first arrived at [a stage] when his mind [still] became intoxicated upon his meeting with the magician, and he fell flat on the floor when he observed Bohun Wuren's archery skills. But at last, when he came close to enter the *Dao*, he stopped at riding the wind and returned.<sup>103</sup>

Herein he diverges from Zhuang Zhou by a great margin! 要其歸，皆原於道德之指，然考其言，躋其意，究其所造，至其見神巫而心醉，觀伯昏無人之射而伏地，卒其所以進乎道者，止於乘風而歸，則其去莊周也遠矣。

*Zhuangzi* states: "Master Lie was able to mount the wind and ride it, but he still had something he relied upon."<sup>104</sup> 莊子曰：列子御風而行，猶有所待也。

Wohoo! Making speed without hurry and reaching [the destination] without action – only the utmost divine under Heaven, the manifestation of Mister Lao [is capable of this].<sup>105</sup> 嗚呼，不疾而速，不行而至，惟天下之至神、老氏之實體。

In times of leisure, away from the myriad state affairs, We [the emperor] have already reviewed the *Five Thousand Words* (namely, the entire text of *Laozi*) and composed instructions and explanations according to them. Moreover [We] have commented on the "Inner Chapters" of *Zhuangzi*. Hence, it would be impossible not to expound upon the work of Sir Master Lie as well. Let [Us] now elucidate what [We] have heard, in the hope that future sages gain a deep understanding of Us. 朕萬機之餘，既閱五千言，爲之訓解，又嘗注莊子“內篇”，而子列子之書不可以無述也，聊釋以所聞，以俟後聖之知我者。

Preface from the first day of the intercalary ninth month of the *wuxu* year in the Zhenghe reign (October 24, 1118). 政和戊戌閏九月朔日序。

Huizong's introductory words indicate that he regards the *Liezi* classic as somewhat of a first-person account of an adept eager to follow the teachings of the Old Master. After initial struggles, this adept eventually manages to touch upon the *Dao* itself. Intriguing is his remark that Master Lie "stopped at riding the wind and returned 止於乘風而歸"

<sup>103</sup> For *Liezi* passages that depict different stages of Master Lie's own development from forlorn student to Daoist adept, see Yang, *Liezi jishi*, pp. 46-48 (summarized pp. 146-47), and pp. 51-53, 70-76.

<sup>104</sup> The single most famous statement made about Master Lie; see Guo, *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> Allusion to the deified Old Master notwithstanding, this is a reference to the *Great Commentary*; see Fu, *Yi jing tongzhu*, pp. 113-4.

when he arrived at this point, as well as that he therein “diverges from Zhuang Zhou by a great margin 則其去莊周也遠矣。” We have already seen that the idea of “spiritual journeys 神遊” into the celestial realms and the internal conflict of choosing between spiritual and mundane were concerns of the emperor. Although as a written work *Zhuangzi* was far more influential than *Liezi*, no anecdote exists about Zhuang Zhou himself ever having gained comparable abilities or having made a similar choice. Master Lie is portrayed as an actual practitioner and, when taken together, the stories about him describe his entire journey from forlorn disciple to the epitome of a Daoist adept. Regarding the literary figures alone, it is not difficult to imagine that Master Lie had a different appeal to Huizong than did the skeptical dialectics of Zhuang Zhou. After all, the emperor underwent a similar development, from being a mere inquisitive student of Daoist masters to becoming the Master of the Teachings and Ruler through the Dao.<sup>106</sup>

Noteworthy in this regard is also Huizong’s judgement on two other illustrious figures that prominently feature in *Liezi*: the Yellow Thearch (*Huangdi* 黃帝) and King Mu of Zhou (*Zhou Mu wang* 周穆王), the namesakes of the work’s second and third chapters respectively. The *Liezi* passage depicts the Yellow Thearch as a dedicated but sorrowful ruler who, after meditating and fasting for several months, falls asleep and has a dream that turns out to be a spirit journey by means of which he awakens to the *Dao*. After this awakening he rules the realm for another twenty-eight years, guiding it to Heaven-like peace, before he finally ascends into the celestial realm.<sup>107</sup> Huizong regards this figure as a “perfected person” and praises him for his ability to let his spirit wander and to “dismiss his entanglements with all existence and return to the unity 去萬有之累而將復乎一。”<sup>108</sup> As seen above, in his preface to the *Scripture of Western Ascension*, Huizong styled himself in similar fashion.

King Mu likewise goes on a journey of the spirit and has an epiphany that leads him to undertake his mythical journey to the West.<sup>109</sup> In contrast to the Yellow Thearch or emperor Huizong, however, his initial spiritual journey was not voluntary but forced by an outsider.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Regarding Huizong’s early involvement with Daoism, see Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, chap. 5.

<sup>107</sup> See Yang, *Liezi jishi*, p. 43.

<sup>108</sup> DZ 732, j.4, p. 4a.

<sup>109</sup> See Yang, *Liezi jishi*, pp. 90–99.

<sup>110</sup> See Yang, *Liezi jishi*, p. 91.

And, as Huizong emphasizes, the king only had to go on his subsequent physical travels, because he was not able to recreate this spiritual journey:

The divine makes speed without hurrying and reaches [its destination] without action.<sup>111</sup> But King Mu did not realize this. Hence, when he traveled in and between the six directions, he would order carriages and side-horses, in order to make ten thousand miles a day. Although he reached the country of Qusou, ascended the mound of Kunlun, viewed the palace of the Yellow Thearch, and paid visit to the Queen Mother atop of Jade Lake, he was still not able to ride atop the *qi* of the clouds, charioteer flying dragons, and journey beyond the four seas.<sup>112</sup> Hence [*Liezi*] says: “He was almost divine!” Meaning that he was close to becoming divine, but not divine yet.

神不疾而速，不行而至。穆王不知，所以出入六合在此，而命駕驂乘，日行萬里。故雖至巨蒐之國，升崑崙之丘，觀黃帝之宮，賓王母于瑤池之上，非乘雲氣，御飛龍，游乎四海之外者也。故曰：幾神人哉，言近於神而非神也。<sup>113</sup>

The ability to let one's spirit roam freely and become divine evidently was of utmost importance for the emperor, possibly because he claimed to possess this ability. Portraying himself on a stage of divine enlightenment comparable to that of the Yellow Thearch, of course further legitimized his own thearchic rule. Moreover, contrary to King Mu, who immediately left his court and set out on his physical journey, both Master Lie and the Yellow Thearch decided to return to their respective duties. Master Lie passed on his teachings and the Yellow Thearch brought perfect peace to his realm. This again is strongly reminiscent of the same bodhisattva-esque, messianic portrayal that Huizong painted of himself around the time that he composed the commentary.<sup>114</sup> This sympathy for, and possible identification with, the purported author and its other protagonists may explain why he chose the Daoist classic *Liezi* for inclusion in the curriculum over other important classics as, for example, the historically complicated work titled *Wenzi* 文子.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>111</sup> See n. 105, above.

<sup>112</sup> A reference to the *Zhuangzi* chap. “Xiao yao you” 逍遙遊; see Guo, *Zhuangzi jishi*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>113</sup> DZ 732, j. 7, p. 10b.

<sup>114</sup> Within this context it is worth considering whether Huizong's altered quote from the *Great Commentary* towards the end of his preface indicates that he is regarding Master Lie as another manifestation of the deified Mister Lao 老氏之實體.

<sup>115</sup> Up until the Tang era, *Wenzi* had a more respected status than that of *Liezi*, which was only canonized at par with *Wenzi* under emperor Xuanzong; see Liu Xu 劉詢 (888–947) et

Another possible answer lies within *Liezi's* contents. Besides spiritual journeys, dreams likewise played an important role in Huizong's self-representation. In fact, one of his more impressive nightly visions in 1113 was cited as impetus for the accelerated promotion of Daoism.<sup>116</sup> The *Liezi* may be the first indigenous classic that overtly discusses dreams and visions in the context of illusion and reality, and thereby questions the fabric of existence from an epistemological angle.<sup>117</sup> The very first lines of Huizong's preface indicate that the work's depiction of this topic provided an inspiration. The emperor felt that in *Liezi's* teaching, a prerequisite for personal salvation was the realization that it is misleading to differentiate between dream and reality, between existence and nonexistence, and so forth. In fact, any dualistic thinking per se must be abolished in order that a person become fully reunited with the *Dao*. Picking up on the dialectic of the Madhyamaka-inspired "Twofold Mystery" (*chongxuan* 重玄) literature, Huizong repeatedly emphasizes the importance of "forgetting both 兩忘" sides within any given dichotomy and thereby reach a state of mystical oneness.<sup>118</sup>

Remarkably, this idea gains even greater significance within the subcommentary of Fan Zhixu and in Li Shibiao's *Ten Essays on Zhuangzi and Liezi*, which is based on Fan's work.<sup>119</sup> Neither of these two authors appear satisfied with the extent of Huizong's interpretation. In talking about this topic, they borrow far more overtly from the logical constructs prepared by the Mādhyamikas and the "Twofold Mystery"

---

al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 9, p. 213; also Barrett, *Taoism under the Tang*, pp. 64–69. As with *Liezi*, this text had been considered a forgery. But as Huizong's treatment of *Liezi* demonstrates, this would not have been enough reason to exclude *Wenzi* from the curriculum.

<sup>116</sup> See Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, pp. 346–48. As Ebrey rightfully reminds the reader, it is uncertain whether the emperor believed in visions or merely used them for political purposes. Tang Daijian, on the other hand, declares that Huizong's visions were deliberate fabrications; Tang Daijian 唐代劍, *Songdai Daojiao guanli zhidu yanjiu* 宋代道教管理制度研究 (Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2003), pp. 28–29.

<sup>117</sup> See Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2014), pp. 150–59.

<sup>118</sup> See, e.g., DZ 732, *j.4*, p. 18a; *j. 7*, p. .2a; *j. 7*, p. 23b. Madhyamaka refers to a Buddhist school that traces its roots back to Nāgārjuna's (ca. 150–250) epochal *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Verses on the Middle Way*; *Zhongguan lun* 中觀論). Via the work of Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) and his concept of "four levels of twofold truth" (*sichong erdi* 四重二諦), this school had an enormous influence on Tang-era *chongxuan* authors who combined the Madhyamaka style of exegesis that analyzed complex syntax-logic as a means to enlightenment with the metaphysical speculation brought forth in earlier *xuanxue* 玄學 literature, see, e.g., Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 2002) pp. 52–76, and Friederike Assandri, *Beyond the Daoe jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism* (Magdalena: Three Pines P., 2009).

<sup>119</sup> For detailed studies of these two texts, see Sage, "We Don't Need No (Confucian) Education!" and "Late Northern Song Exegesis."

writers.<sup>120</sup> In contrast to these dialectically sophisticated approaches, Huizong's reading never questions the very fabric of reality. When he mentions the "divine" or "spiritual 神," he always depicts it as an achievable state of being, not just another concept of "empty 空" (Skt.: *sūnyatā*) or "void 虛" that must be overcome.<sup>121</sup> This may be due to purely practical reasons. After all, Huizong styled himself as a deity. Undermining the very concept of the divine would negate his efforts to claim divine legitimacy.

Reading the commentary less in terms of its political implications and more from a personal perspective, the fact that the emperor would not entirely give up the idea of an accessible divine realm gains a slightly different touch. If we accept the assumption that Huizong was indeed a staunch Daoist practitioner, and that his commentaries at least partly reflect his private thoughts, then they leave an almost escapist impression. In his writings, Huizong presents himself as a ruler who is wary of the factional struggles at court that may have stemmed from good intentions but ultimately missed the purpose of the *Dao*, just as the utopias painted by Yang Zhu 楊朱 and Mo Di 墨翟 had done. He can be seen as aware of his mundane duties yet having touched upon the *Dao* and yearned for a recreation of the mystical unity that he found in the divine realm. For an emperor surrounded by luxury, this self-divinization and divinization of the self that would provide access to the realm of the gods surely must have been more attractive than the realization that even this mystical unity is ultimately "empty."

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Huizong's reign ended in disaster and thus does not inspire arguments that make him or his principal adviser(s) out as political geniuses. But regardless of the outcome, his extensive Daoist patronage was not merely the brainchild of a religious fanatic with delusional grandeur who indulged in daydreams and arts rather than taking part in politics. It was part of an overarching endeavor to create an increasingly centralized state with the imperial court as the single source of authority over the entire religio-philosophical landscape.<sup>122</sup> In this regard, the creation of a new, imperially-authorized set of exegetical literature

<sup>120</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 88–124.

<sup>121</sup> See, e.g., his discussion of the Yellow Thearch passage in DZ 732, *j.* 4, p. 7a-b.

<sup>122</sup> Of course, this does not rule out its *also* having been the brainchild of a religious fanatic with delusional grandeur who indulged in daydreams.

parallels in scope and purpose similar efforts that had been undertaken by Wang Anshi during the rule of Huizong's father.

As an adamant advocate for an autocratic style of rulership, Wang's earlier reforms tackled almost every aspect of public life, be it the military, state economy and trade, the government and its bureaucratic apparatus, or the educational system that fed the apparatus. As part of these reforms, Wang and his confidants composed a significant number of new commentaries on the Confucian and Daoist classics. Just as it was the case with these Shenzong-era writings, in Huizong's reign too the primary goal of imperially recognized commentaries was not to promulgate concrete policies, but to serve as the court's tool to establish moral authority over religio-philosophical discourse. Unlike Wang Anshi, however, Huizong favored a Daoist-inspired state ideology and even attempted to install Divine Empyrean Daoism as the *de facto* state religion. Consequently, the Daoist classics played a more integral part within the educational reforms instigated by him and Cai Jing. The early Daoist classics *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Liezi* were all made part of the curriculum of the Daoist schools established under his rule, and the imperially authorized commentaries on these texts were imposed upon the scholars within the imperial school system. The exegetical literature composed under this system was not only designed to foster a new generation of bureaucrats loyal to the thearchy, but also to support the emperor's claim for (divine) legitimacy.

Shin-yi Chao has pointed to the factional struggles during the early years of Huizong's reign that casted doubt on the emperor's rightfulness as the successor in order to propose that the emperor's involvement with the Divine Empyrean movement was meant to bolster his legitimacy.<sup>123</sup> Regardless of whether this was indeed his main motivation, the emperor certainly was actively involved in shaping and promoting a public persona. Maggie Bickford and Patricia Buckley Ebrey found evidence for this in both his painted self-representations and stele inscription texts.<sup>124</sup> And from what we can deduce from his variegated approaches to the different Daoist classics and scriptures, this was one of the major driving factors behind the composition of the imperial commentaries as well. The persona that was created within this process varied according to the target audience. Huizong presented himself

<sup>123</sup> See Chao Shin-yi, "Daoist Examinations," pp. 26–27, and "Huizong and the Divine Empyrean Palace Temple Network," in Ebrey and Bickford, eds., *Song Huizong and Northern Song China*, pp. 324–26, 357. Regarding the doubts about the legitimacy of Huizong's succession, see also Levine, "The Reigns of Hui-tsung and Ch'in-tsung," pp. 561–66.

<sup>124</sup> See Bickford, "Huizong's Paintings"; Ebrey, "Huizong's Stone Inscriptions."

as sage-ruler, one who was well-read in the classics and respectful of his governmental duties in relation to the literati elite. But for Daoist practitioners, he simultaneously styled himself as Daoist deity, the messianic figure that has returned to earth to guide its underlings on the path towards salvation within the divine realm. In the end, the emperor claimed absolute moral authority over all aspects of state ideology.

At the time the commentaries were authored, the fierce political trench wars between the autocratic reform faction and the anti-reformers, who favored a less intrusive style of government, had already plagued the imperial court for decades. Despite his early decision to support Cai Jing and his policies, anti-reformist and anti-autocratic voices remained audible throughout Huizong's reign. One can thus speculate that the claim for divine authority might have been but a political maneuver to silence the opposition. After all, who if not a messianic deity had the right, no, the obligation to intervene in every aspect of public life, curb heretical doctrines, and guide its people to salvation?

That the creation of the imperially authorized commentaries was unlikely to have been motivated solely by the emperor's faith in the Divine Empyrean movement can be deduced from their contents. With one exception, Huizong does not employ any overt references to any Divine Empyrean rituals or beliefs. That is apart from the underlying allusion to his being a deity who is able to communicate with the *Dao*. Though this latter point does speak of some delusional grandeur, it does not necessarily prove any specific belief other than the one he had in his own visions of Daoism and his legitimacy as thearch.

Despite this tentative conclusion, there is no significant reason to doubt that the Song emperor Huizong was a devout practitioner of at least parts of the Daoist traditions and that his elaborations on the Daoist classics at least partly reflect his personal interest in them. After all, being a convinced Daoist does not contradict the longing to establish an autocratic thearchy: it likely furthers it. Neither, however, does being a divine autocrat, or, to use Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein's phrase, being a "[D]aocratic Emperor,"<sup>125</sup> exclude political diletantism.

In numerous edicts, Huizong emphasized that the awakening to the ultimate Daoist truths will benefit all humankind and that he therefore wishes to spread the teachings throughout his realm.<sup>126</sup> The same

<sup>125</sup> Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, "The Book of the Yellow Court: A Lost Song Commentary of the 12th Century," in *CEA* 14 (2004), p. 187.

<sup>126</sup> See Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, p. 369.

message is echoed in his preface to the *Scripture of Western Ascension*, cited above. If Huizong did indeed believe in his own messianic powers and a universal salvation that is possible merely through the process of self-divinization and mystic contemplation that he continuously propagates throughout his commentaries, it would be plausible to suggest that he at the same time underestimated the dangers that awaited in the mundane realm.

Judging from the seemingly successful attempt to recruit students for the short-lived Daoist schools and the comparatively numerous commentaries on the Daoist classics that were compiled during his reign, one might conclude that his goal to spread Daoist teachings was fulfilled. But in the end, despite his concentrated efforts, he was never able to unite the entire scholarly elite behind his vision of a unified state ideology under Daoist leadership. Resistance from students and scholars, not only against his emphasis on Daoist teachings but against his reform of the education system was present throughout his reign. This resistance intensified significantly after 1120, when Cai Jing retired and the military pressure from the Song's northern enemies rose.<sup>127</sup> The subsequent surrender to the Jin dynasty guaranteed that no comparable reforms were implemented during the following Southern Song.<sup>128</sup> In hindsight, Huizong's promotion of Daoism, the so-called "[D]aoist Renaissance of the Twelfth Century,"<sup>129</sup> had an effect opposite to the emperor's intentions. We might say that the downfall of his regime and its association with Daoist ideologies contributed massively to Daoism's waning influence on government affairs and the subsequent ascent of Neo-Confucian thought.

#### *LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

Schipper & Verellen      Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, eds.,  
*The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*

<sup>127</sup> Regarding student resistance, see, e.g., Thomas H. C. Lee, *Government Education and the Examinations in Sung China* (Hong Kong: Chinese U.P., 1985), pp. 190–92; Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong*, pp. 436–40; and Chu, *Politics of Higher Education*, chap. 6.

<sup>128</sup> See Chaffee, "Sung Education," p. 305.

<sup>129</sup> Michel Strickmann, "The Taoist Renaissance of the Twelfth Century," unpub. paper presented at the Third International Conference on Taoist Studies, Unterägeri (1979).