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The Man-Bird Mountain: Writing, Prophecy, and Revelation in Early China

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Abstract

The Taoist Canon (*Daozang*) contains a remarkable illustration entitled *Renniao shan tu*, or *Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain*, found in a text originally dating from the mid-fifth century. Other Taoist works describe this mountain as the ultimate origin of revealed scriptures and even of the entire Canon. In this article, I examine three main themes related to the *Chart*. The first is the role of birds in traditional accounts of the origins of Chinese writing. The second theme concerns the function of birds in the revelation of prophetic charts and texts, described in Han-dynasty “weft texts.” The third theme is the early narratives focused on the so-called “winged men” (*yuren*). This is followed by an analysis of the *Chart*, including its inscriptions, and of the text that contains it. An appendix provides translations of the inscriptions and of similar passages found in other Taoist sources.

Keywords

birds – writing – revelation – prophecy – apocrypha – taoism – taoist canon



FIGURE 2.1 The Man-Bird Mountain
 SOURCE: XUANLAN RENNIAO SHAN JINGTU, 5A

1 Introduction

In any culture where identifying, complying with, and possibly predicting cosmic, natural, or human patterns is one of the foundations of social and individual life, uncommon and unforeseeable events have an ambiguous significance. In many cases, such events are seen as negative omens, or even as signs of a rupture between the ordinary and the sacred, the human and the divine. The same events, however, can also break the ordinary course of things in a different way: an odd occurrence or phenomenon may signal – or may be in itself – a revelation, a charge, or a direction given by God, Heaven, or a deity to humanity as a whole or to a single person. An uncommon event, in other words, is in the first place a sign that indicates not only a point of rupture, but also of communication, between different domains.

This study is concerned with one of the many signs that connect two orders of reality to one another. Because of their gift of raising in flight to heaven and treading the earthly ground, birds play in several cultures the function of mediators between our world and the world above us. In parallel to this, birds are also images of the descent of the divine spirit to earth and of the ascent of the human spirit to heaven. For these reasons, birds are usually auspicious creatures; it is worthwhile to remember that the word “auspice” (commonly meaning a divine or prophetic token) ultimately derives from the Latin words *avis* “bird” and *specere* “to observe.” In this sense, birds fulfill a prophetic function by transmitting and revealing the divine or celestial will to humanity – a function that, as we shall see, is performed in China through the transmission of “revealed texts” that are delivered by birds, and that are often written in the birds’ own language.¹

More precisely, this article focuses on a document entitled *Renniao shan tu* 人鳥山圖, or *Chart of the Bird-Man Mountain*, that incorporates the themes summarized above and places them in an even wider context. One of the two extant versions of the chart is shown above (fig. 2.1; for the second version, see fig. 2.15). This version is found in a work entitled *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu* 玄覽人鳥山經圖 (Scripture and Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain for the Contemplation of the Mystery), which existed by the mid-fifth century but is preserved in the Taoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏) in a version probably dating from ca. 700 CE. In the version shown above, the chart has three main components: (1) Black and white cloud-like patterns, which are deemed to represent the invisible “true form” (*zhenxing* 真形) of the mountain, with caverns, pathways, and tunnels; (2) The silhouette of a bird – recognizable through its beak

1 On birds as auspicious omens in China see Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China*, 25–88 *passim*. On their roles in prophecy and divination see Despeux, “Auguromancie” (especially the section entitled “Corvomancie,” 445–47, which is mainly concerned with inauspicious omens documented by Dunhuang manuscripts). On the mentions of birds in the mantic portions of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) see Liu Baozhen, “*Zhouyi niaozhanlei guayaocai shizheng*” – In China, the relation of birds to prophecy and divination is not limited to the ancient times. In her *Chinese Ritual and Politics*, Emily Ahern describes a divinatory session that she witnessed on the streets of the San-hsia 三峽 district of Taipei. As she reports, two trained birds pick two sticks from a set of eight, and two cards from a set of sixty-four. The diviner’s response is based on the chosen sticks and cards. Importantly, each morning the diviner presents his birds to the goddess Guanyin 觀音 (strictly speaking, the Buddhist Avalokiteśvara, but in China, a popular female deity), “telling her that he is going to tell fortunes. Then when the birds pull out the cards and the sticks, the goddess’s spirit is with them, directing what they do” (p. 49). For the diviner, therefore, the two birds represent the deity Guanyin and embody her spirit. I am grateful to Song Xiaokun for pointing out this account to me.

and its wings – placed near the center of the picture; and (3) Two external squared bands inscribed with characters.

The Bird-Man Mountain and its background have been studied by several scholars, including Kristofer Schipper, John Lagerwey, Judith M. Boltz, and more recently Susan Huang and Gil Raz. All of them (in particular, Schipper and Boltz) have pointed out the close relation of the Chart to other “true form” illustrations found in the Taoist Canon and elsewhere.² These illustrations are best known through the different series of the Charts of the True Forms of the Five Peaks (*Wuyue zhenxing tu* 五嶽真形圖), but they also include a chart of the netherworld, or Fengdu 酆都, which again exists in different versions.³ In addition, scholars have looked at the Chart of the Bird-Man Mountain in relation to Taoist ritual,⁴ have examined it as an instance of Taoist “sacred geography,”⁵ and have used it as a starting point to discuss examples of the so-called “bird script” in Taoist and other sources – a subject to which I will return.⁶

In this contribution, I first survey three of the main themes underlying the Chart and the text that contains it – namely, the role that several early Chinese sources assign to birds in the origin of writing; the functions of birds in the revelation of prophetic texts, including those documented by the Han-dynasty apocrypha (*weishu* 緯書, or “weft texts”); and the representations of “winged men” (or other beings of a hybrid avian-human shape) that antedate the bird pictured in the Chart. In the fourth and last part of this study, I look in closer detail at the Chart itself and its relation to writing and revelation. Although the former three subjects are arranged in a broad temporal sequence, this is not a “historical” study of bird-writing or of any of the related themes. I have attempted, rather, to frame the discussion of each subject in ways that help to understand different aspects of the others, and to unravel some of the mysteries underlying the Man-Bird Mountain.

2 Schipper, “The True Form: Reflections on the Liturgical Basis of Taoist Art,” 102–3; J. M. Boltz, “Cartography in the Daoist Canon,” 24–34.

3 A survey of studies and graphic documentation concerning these charts is found in Huang, *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*, 123–29 and 165–70.

4 Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History*, 161–66.

5 Raz, “Daoist Sacred Geography,” 1438–41.

6 Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 136–54 *passim*.

2 Birds and the Origins of Writing

In several cultures, birds are deemed to speak a secret language, which only few humans can understand and in some cases even speak. The case of St. Francis is the best-known within the Christian tradition, but other examples are found with St. Benedict and St. Paul, and similar themes also occur in Greece, in Rome, and in Nordic legends. Long before the advent of mass-tourism and mobile phones, the *silbo* of La Gomera may have been an example of a “secret language” spoken by imitating the sounds produced by birds.⁷ In the Islamic tradition – leaving aside the Sufi initiatic poem, *The Conference of the Birds* (*Manṭiq-ut-Tayr*, a title also rendered as *The Language of the Birds*) – a passage of the *Qur’ān*, where birds symbolically represent the angels, ascribes these words to Solomon: “We have been taught the language of the birds and have been given abundance of all things” (27:16).⁸ In these and analogous cases, the birds’ language is deemed to be primordial; in particular, it is believed to predate the multiplication of languages that God inflicted as a punishment upon humanity after the construction of the Babel Tower (*Genesis* 11).

In China, we find a similar complex of ideas, with an important difference: the birds’ language is typically not spoken, but written. Birds are deemed to write a secret script, which, if deciphered, confers knowledge of Heaven and Earth and enables humans to obtain control over demons. Both properties, in turn, make it possible to lay the foundations of human society.

7 The *silbo* is – or perhaps one should say, was – spoken in the La Gomera island of the Canaries. In the present day, the local administration is trying to save it from oblivion by making its learning mandatory in schools, and UNESCO named it in 2009 as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Despite these praiseworthy efforts, as I was told on the island, the older people who used to speak it are slowly disappearing for natural causes, while others find it easier to communicate via cellphones. For these reasons, the *silbo* is now mostly a phenomenon to entertain tourists. On the possible origins of the *silbo* as a “secret language” see Galandri, “Il silbo, la lingua degli uccelli e le tradizioni iniziatiche,” esp. 76–77. – In China, as noted by Despeux, “Auguromancie,” 445, the Parthian An Shigao 安世高 (second century CE) was a specialist of the “birds’ language” and is said to have translated an Indian text on this subject.

8 As summarized by Waida Manabu, “Birds,” 949, the *Conference of the Birds* “... uses the imagery of birds as human souls that journey through the seven valleys and, at the end of the road, discover their identity with the Simurgh, the divine bird that ‘has a name but no body,’ a perfectly spiritual being.” – For the passage of the *Qur’ān*, see Guénon, “The Language of Birds,” 80, and Galandri, “Il silbo,” 82–85.

2.1 *The Myth of Cang Jie*

The early Chinese tradition has transmitted two main accounts of the origins of writing. According to the first account, the written language was created by Cang Jie 蒼頡 (or 倉頡), whose legends include two significant details: he was born on a mountain called Bird's Wings (Niaoyu shan 鳥羽山), and he had four eyes, which enabled him simultaneously to look at Heaven above and the Earth below, and therefore to draw inspiration from both.⁹ In the mid-second century BCE, the *Huainan zi* 淮南子 contains a short passage that refers to Cang Jie's creation of writing:

昔者蒼頡作書而天雨粟，鬼夜哭。

In ancient times, when Cang Jie created writing, Heaven rained down millet, and the demons howled at night.¹⁰

I will return to the millet rain and the demon's howls. We should first note that the *Huainan zi* does not deem writing to be beneficial for humanity: the passage quoted above continues by saying that because of the creation of writing, "the [people's] capabilities became more and more numerous, but their virtue became more and more feeble" 能愈多而德愈薄矣.¹¹ Elsewhere, instead, the *Huainan zi* gives a more favorable account of the creation of writing, saying that Cang Jie's creation provided the means to establish the state institutions, which require keeping records and accounts:

蒼頡之初作書，以辯治百官，領理萬事。愚者得以不忘，智者得以志遠。

When Cang Jie first created writing, it served to administer the hundred offices and manage the ten thousand affairs. The unintelligent were able not to forget things, and the wise were able to record distant events.¹²

9 On Cang Jie see Chaves, "The Legacy of Ts'ang Chieh: The Written Word as Magic"; Bottero, "Cang Jie and the Invention of Writing"; and Wm. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, 129–38. All these studies refer to several other sources in addition to those that I quote below.

10 *Huainan zi*, 8.4b; see Le Blanc and Mathieu, *Huainan zi*, 338, and Major et al., *The Huainanzi*, 274.

11 *Huainan zi*, 8.4b. In this passage, the *Huainan zi* mentions the creations of writing by Cang Jie and of wells by Bo Yi 伯益, involving both in its criticism: like writing, wells are another traditional image that refers to the establishment of social institutions.

12 *Huainan zi*, 20.5b; see Le Blanc and Mathieu, 962, and Major et al., 806. Here again, however, writing is not an entirely beneficial invention. In the translation by Major et al., the passage continues by saying: "By the age of decline, the wicked used it to inscribe

According to the second tradition, writing instead developed from the eight trigrams, which the mythical emperor Fu Xi 伏羲 drew by identifying the correspondences between the images of Heaven (*xiang* 象, stars and constellations) and the patterns of the Earth (*fa* 法, often identified as mountains and rivers, but also including other physical features). This tradition originates in a passage of the “Appended Sayings” of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes):

古者包犧氏之王天下也，仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地。觀鳥獸之文與地之宜。近取諸身，遠取諸物。於是始作八卦，以通神明之德，以類萬物之情。作結繩而為罔罟，以佃以漁。

In ancient times, when Bao Xi (*i.e.*, *Fu Xi*) was the ruler of the world, he looked upwards and contemplated the images in Heaven, he looked downwards and contemplated the models on the Earth. He contemplated how the signs (*wen*) left by birds and animals suited the land. Nearby, he drew upon himself; afar, he drew upon things and creatures. It was in this way that he created for the first time the eight trigrams. Through them, he communicated with the virtue of Numinous Light (*shenming*) and classified the qualities (*qing*) of the ten thousand things. Having created knotted cords, he made nets and seines for hunting and for fishing.¹³

While Fu Xi here only creates the eight trigrams, later this account was incorporated into a longer narrative that also includes the creation of writing. We shall return to this extended version (and to the “knotted cords”) as well, but here we may already note that one of the sources of inspiration for Fu Xi’s creation of the eight trigrams was the traces left by birds on the earth’s ground.

With regard to the rain of millet and the demon’s howls mentioned in the *Huainan zi*, several scholars have understood both portents as ominous, probably owed to the general negative tone of the passage. The two portents, however, appear to be antithetical in nature: the millet sent by Heaven is an auspicious phenomenon, because millet is a source of nourishment. Indeed, the commentary on this passage, variously attributed to Xu Shen 許慎 (58–148?) or to Gao You 高誘 (fl. 160–220), explains the passage in this way. After the invention of writing, people would “ignore the basics and busy themselves

falsehoods in order to free those who deserved punishment and in order to execute those who were not guilty.”

13 *Yijing*, “Xici” 繫辭, B.2.

with the peripheral”; as a consequence, the commentary continues, “Heaven knew that they would starve, therefore it rained millet.”¹⁴

On the contrary, the creation of writing was calamitous for demons, which “howled at night.” The commentary explains this part of the account as follows:

鬼恐為書文所劾，故夜哭也。

The demons feared that they would be impeached by written records, therefore they howled at night.¹⁵

Anna Seidel was probably the first Western scholar to call attention to this passage, pointing out that “the revelation of [the demons’] names, and the visibility of the latter in writing, conferred power over them.”¹⁶ Elaborating on this and analogous remarks by other scholars, James Robson has noted that “the earliest forms of writing in China were not used to transcribe human speech but, rather, preceded it” and were used to communicate with spirits. Léon Vandermeersch, in particular, suggested that “the most archaic prototypes of the Chinese characters must have been emblematic monograms of spiritual protectors,” and “must have been simply talismanic, that is, composed of juxtaposed or imbricated graphs without any articulation of a linguistic nature.” A similar definition of the earliest forms of Chinese graphs has been given by William Boltz in his study of the early history of the Chinese script.¹⁷ Robson concludes by pointing out that “to know the name or ‘true form’ (*zhenxing*)

14 *Huainan zi*, 8.4b. See Wm. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, 131–32.

15 *Huainan zi*, 8.4b.

16 See Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments: Taoist Roots in the Apocrypha,” 320–23; and her “Taoism: The Unofficial High Religion of China,” 43, from which I draw the sentence quoted above. On this passage see also Wm. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, 132–34; Bottero, “Cang Jie and the Invention of Writing,” 141–42; and Acker, *Some Tang and Pre-Tang Texts on Chinese Painting*, 63 n.1.

17 See Wm. Boltz, “The Invention of Writing in China,” 6, which I take the liberty to quote here with omission of a few technical details: “[W]hen Chinese graphs were first invented many, perhaps most, were realistically depictive and conveyed meaning through that fact alone.... Such graphs are pictographs, not writing ... they represent things, and therefore have meaning, but at the same time they are phonetically unmarked ... *because they do not stand for words*. When a graph comes to stand conventionally for the name of the thing in question, rather than iconically for the thing itself, then it represents directly and primarily not a thing but a spoken word. Such a graph is now phonetically marked, ... and in that function the graph is legitimately and properly called writing” (*italics added*). Needless to say, these remarks are also of importance for our understanding of the Taoist *fu* 符, the so-called “talismans.”

of a spirit meant that one had control over that spirit,” a remark that is even more true for the *written* form of the spirit’s name. It is for this reason that the demons feared to be “impeached by written records.”¹⁸

Two centuries later, Wang Chong 王充 (27–97), in his *Lunheng* 論衡, is the first author of an extant text to relate directly Cang Jie’s creation of writing to the traces left by birds on the earth’s ground:

以見鳥迹而知為書。... 天非以鳥迹命倉頡。... 而倉頡起鳥迹也。

It was by observing the traces left by birds that [Cang Jie] understood that they were a script (*shu*).... It is not that Heaven used the traces left by birds to give Cang Jie the mandate [to create characters] ... It was Cang Jie himself who was inspired by the traces left by birds.¹⁹

Although Wang Chong is skeptical with regard to a direct intervention of Heaven in the creation of writing, he does not question the role played by birds. Indeed, in his view birds were Cang Jie’s unique source of inspiration.

Not long later, the two traditions on the creation of Chinese writing – one focused on Fu Xi, the other on Cang Jie – were merged.²⁰ This is shown, in particular, by the above-mentioned Xu Shen, who describes a process in three stages in the postface to his *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explication of the Signs and Analysis of the Characters). First, Fu Xi created the eight trigrams (concerning this stage, Xu Shen reproduces almost verbatim the passage of the “Appended Sayings” quoted above). In the second stage, Fu Xi’s successor, Shennong 神農, invented the “knotted cords” (*jiesheng* 結繩). Unlike Fu Xi, he did that not in order to enable people to hunt and fish, but in order to keep track of items and affairs:

及神農氏，結繩為治，而統其事。庶業其繁，飾偽萌生。

Later, Shennong knotted cords in order to govern and administered the [state] affairs. The various occupations proliferated, and ornament and artifice began to develop.

18 See Robson, “Signs of Power,” 136–38, and Vandermeersch, *Wangdao ou la voie royale*, 477 and 479. On this subject see also Lagerwey, “The Oral and Written in Chinese and Western Religion,” 301–2.

19 *Lunheng*, 18.800; see Forke, *Lun-hêng*, 2:27, and Kalinowski, *Wang Chong: Balance des discours*, 151. On this and other mentions of Cang Jie in the *Lunheng* see Bottero, “Cang Jie and the Invention of Writing,” 145–48.

20 See Wm. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, 136.

In the third stage Cang Jie – whom Xu Shen calls the “scribe” (*shi* 史) of another mythical emperor,²¹ the Yellow Emperor or Huangdi 黃帝 – created writing by looking, once again, at the traces left by birds and animals on the earth:

黃帝之史倉頡見鳥獸蹄迹之迹，知分理之可相別異也。初造書契。百工以乂（=治），萬品以察。

Cang Jie, the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, saw the traces of the footprints of birds and animals, and understood that their different patterns could be distinguished from one another. He was the first to create writing. By means of it, the hundred tasks could be governed, and the ten thousand matters could be examined.²²

The merging of the two traditions involves that writing was seen at the same time as a reflection of the cosmic order and as a means to control its ominous facets. The signs left by birds played a role in both of these aspects.

2.2 *The Bird Script*

The “bird script,” or *niaoshu* 鳥書, is one of the “six scripts” (*liushu* 六書) that Xu Shen lists and describes in his dictionary:

時有六書。一曰古文，孔子壁中書也。二曰奇字，即古文而異者也。三曰篆書，即小篆，秦始皇帝使下杜人程邈所作也。四曰左書，即秦隸書。五曰繆篆，所以摹印也。六曰鳥蟲書，所以書幡信也。

At that time, there were six scripts (*shu*): (1) The ancient script (*guwen*), which is [the script of] the writings found in the walls of Confucius’ [house]. (2) The odd graphs (*qizi*), which is a different form of the ancient script. (3) The seal script (*zhuanshu*), which is the “small seal” [script] (*xiaozhuan*), created by Cheng Mao from Xiadu under the order of Qin Shihuang di. (4) The attendant script (*zuoshu*), which is the Qin-dynasty “clerical script” (*lishu*). (5) The coiled seal [script] (*mouzhuang*), which is used for seals. (6) The bird-and-insect script (*niaochongshu*), which is used as the script of the insignia of government offices (*fanxin*).²³

21 Or perhaps the “archivist,” or even the “historian,” but these three meanings can be interchangeable in premodern Chinese, and the three functions were equivalent in early China.

22 *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 15A.1a–b (p. 753).

23 *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 15A.16b–17a (p. 761). See also Acker, *Some Tang and Pre-Tang Texts on Chinese Painting*, 64. As used in this passage, “six scripts” has nothing to do with the



FIGURE 2.2

Bronze seal bearing an inscription with a bird symbol on top

SOURCE: TSIEN TSUEN-HSUIN, *WRITTEN ON BAMBOO AND SILK*, PLATE 8A

In this and the previous passage quoted from the *Shuowen jiezi*, birds are associated with other creatures in their function of inspiring the creation of writing: animals (or “domestic animals,” *shou* 獸) and insects (*chong* 蟲). This association appears to have faded into disuse in later times, and the sixth script mentioned by Xu Shen came to be known simply as “bird script.”²⁴

The earliest known examples of “bird script” date from the Shang dynasty, but this writing style was used more extensively during the Warring States period (see fig. 2.2).²⁵ In particular, inscriptions in “bird script” are found on bronze objects – mainly swords – dating from the mid-sixth to the late fourth centuries BCE. On the basis of such features as the presence or the absence of an actual character in addition to the depiction of a bird, Yan Zhibin has classified these samples into four varieties, each with two variants (see fig. 2.3).²⁶

Yan Zhibin’s samples consist of “characters” in extremely stylized but nonetheless often recognizable shapes of birds. This suggests that the term *niaoshu* came to denote not only the signs left on the earthly ground by the birds themselves – the “bird script” in the literal sense – but also graphs written in the likeness of birds. Later instances of the latter variety of “bird script” are found in several works, including some found to the Taoist Canon. Susan Huang has collected a remarkable series of these samples in her book on the

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identical term that defines the sixfold classification of ordinary Chinese characters, which was also first outlined by Xu Shen in his *Shuowen jiezi*.

24 According to the Qing-dynasty commentator Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), the term *niaochong shu* 鳥蟲書 derives from the fact that birds were also called *yuchong* 羽蟲, lit., “winged insects.” Following this explanation, *niaochong shu* simply means “bird script.”

25 See Tsién Tsuen-Hsuin, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, 46–47 and 54.

26 Yan Zhibin, “Niaoshu gouxing jianlun.” On the “bird script” see also the rich documentation collected by Rong Geng, “Niaoshu kao.”



FIGURE 2.3 Types of “bird script”
 SOURCE: YAN ZHIBIN, “NIAOSHU GOUXING JIANLUN”

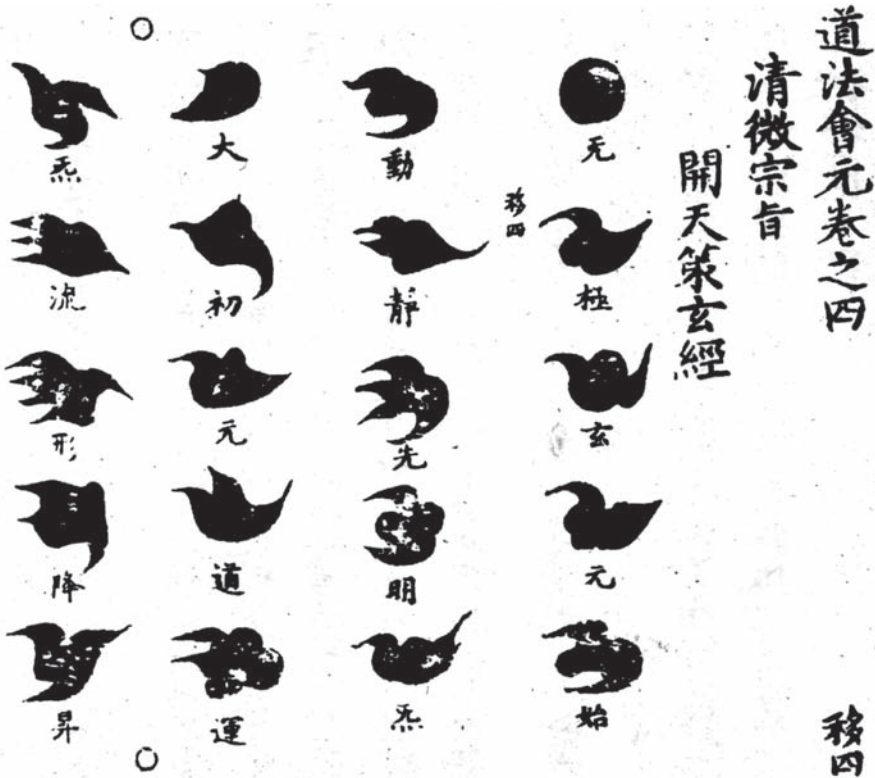


FIGURE 2.4 “Scripture of the Opening of Heaven and the Framework of Mystery” (“Kaitian cexuan jing” 開天策玄經)

SOURCE: *DAOFA HUIYUAN*, 4.1A

Taoist “true form,” two of which deserve mention here.²⁷ The first is found in a Southern Song work belonging to the Qingwei 清微 (Clear Tenuity) corpus, which in a section devoted to the “opening of Heaven” (*kaitian* 開天, the creation of the cosmos), contains a passage whose graphs are made of twenty pictures of birds, each of which is placed above the corresponding ordinary graph (fig. 2.4).²⁸ The second example is important for its similarity to the script used in Taoist talismans (*fu* 符). It is found in another Song-dynasty text belonging to the later Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure) traditions, and it

27 Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 154–64.

28 “Kaitian cexuan jing” 開天策玄經 (Scripture of the Opening of Heaven and the Framework of Mystery), in *Daofa huiyuan*, 4.1a.



FIGURE 2.5
 “Talisman of the Mysterious Dragon” (“Xuanlong zhi fu” 玄龍之符)
 SOURCE: *LINGBAO YUJIAN*, 14.5A

shows a “Talisman of the Mysterious Dragon” (“Xuanlong zhi fu” 玄龍之符) made of four dragons with bird-like heads (fig. 2.5).²⁹

None of these or other Taoist works intend to depict the original “bird script” style of writing or even to imitate it. Rather, the script used in these texts is meant to show that they are prior to any work written in ordinary Chinese script, and their content is as primordial as the earliest form of writing. In fact, a text in “bird script” is not created by humans: it is deemed to be a revealed text. This view draws upon a much wider and older complex of ideas, to which we shall now turn.

3 Birds, Prophecy, and Revelation: the Han-Dynasty Apocrypha

As we have seen, writing in early times was not merely deemed to grant knowledge of Heaven and Earth; on the contrary, it was that knowledge that gave origin to writing. The creation of writing by Cang Jie also conferred power over demons, and enabled Huangdi, one the mythical creators of Chinese civilization, to establish the foundations of human society. Consistently with the bureaucratic model that characterizes many aspects of Chinese religion, writing therefore was, since its origins, a means of dealing with, and taking control of, the supernatural world. This function is not limited to the relation of humans to deities and spirits: Heaven and its gods also use writing to

²⁹ *Lingbao yujian*, 14.5a. For these two examples, see Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 160 and 157, respectively.

communicate with the human world. As Anna Seidel remarked, the Chinese deities “neither speak nor listen, but write and read.”³⁰

3.1 *Writing and Revelation*

In the Chinese tradition as a whole, the two main revealed documents are the River Chart (*Hetu* 河圖) and the Luo Writ (*Luoshu* 洛書). Although both were believed to embody and witness the mandate to rule sanctioned by Heaven, it may be safely assumed that they never existed as physical objects.³¹ For this reason, the texts that mention them are silent about their contents or provide only fragmentary details. The few extant descriptions of their contents in the Han-dynasty apocrypha (*weishu*, or “weft texts”) state that they depicted the “signs of Heaven” (*tianwen* 天文) and the “forms of the Earth” (*dixing* 地形), and not only contained the sequences of past dynasties and rulers, but also prophesied those of the future.³²

In addition, and significantly for our subject, the apocryphal fragments repeatedly state that the River Chart and the Luo Writ were not written in ordinary Chinese characters. A first indication of this feature is found in a fragment of one of the main apocrypha, the *Yuanming bao* 元命包 (The Germ of the Original Mandate). Focusing on Cang Jie, whose status has now risen to “emperor” (*di* 帝), the passage conflates several themes that we have seen above:

30 Seidel, “Taoism,” 43. See also Robson, “Signs of Power,” 136–39.

31 To avoid possible ambiguities, it is worthwhile to remind that the two well-known cosmological charts that bear the same names have little, if anything, in common with the mythical River Chart and Luo Writ. – Apparently the only source that places the River Chart in a “realistic” context is the description of the funeral of King Cheng 成王 of the Zhou (r. 1042/1035–1006 BCE) found in the *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents). On that occasion, says this source, the royal treasures were displayed, including “the large gem, the gem from the wild tribes of the east, the heavenly sounding stones, and the river plan 河圖, all in the side-chamber on the east.” *Shangshu zhengyi*, 18:24 (p. 127); trans. Legge, *The Texts of Confucianism*, 1:554. See Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 297–98, from which I have drawn this citation. Seidel noted that “the context permits the conclusion that [the River Chart] was a precious stone.” As shown by passages quoted below, the Han-dynasty apocrypha (*weishu* 緯書) describe it instead as a scroll.

32 The main descriptions of the contents of the River Chart among the apocrypha include fragments of: (1) the *Chunqiu mingli xu* 春秋命曆序 (it showed “rivers, mountains, streams, and the subdivisions of the provinces”; see Yasui and Nakamura, eds., *Jūshū Isho shūsei* [hereafter *Isho shūsei*], 4B:129); (2) the *Shangshu xuanji quan* 尚書璇璣鈐 (the “sequence of the Mandate,” *mingji* 命紀, and “the periods of beginning and end, existence and disappearance 存亡 of emperors and kings”; in *Isho shūsei*, 2:61); (3) the *Shangshu zhonghou* 尚書中候 (“the sequence of emperors and kings, and the ciphers 數 of their flourishing and disappearance 興亡”; in *Isho shūsei*, 2:75); (4) the *Chunqiu yundou shu* 春秋運斗樞 (in *Isho shūsei*, 4A:156, translated below). See also Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 318–20.

倉帝史皇氏，名頡姓侯剛。龍顏侈哆，四目靈光。實有睿德，生而能書。及受河圖綠字，於是窮天地之變化。仰觀奎星圓曲之勢，俯察龜文、鳥羽、山川、指掌，而創文字，天為雨粟，鬼為夜哭，龍乃潛藏。治百有一十載，都於陽武，終葬衙之利鄉亭。

Emperor Cang, the Scribe-August, was named Jie and surnamed Hougang. He had the face of a dragon and a wide mouth, and his four eyes emitted a supernatural light. He truly had a far-sighted virtue. He was able to write just after he was born. After he received the River Chart in green characters, he thoroughly investigated the transformations of Heaven and Earth. Looking upwards, he contemplated the rounded and winding configuration of the Kui constellation;³³ looking downwards, he examined the signs left by the turtles, the birds' feathers, mountains and rivers, and [the lines on] the fingers and the palms; and he created the written characters (*wenzi*). Heaven rained millet, the demons howled at night, and the dragons went into hiding. His reign lasted 110 years, with capital in Yangwu. After he died, he was buried at Lixianting in Ya.³⁴

This passage establishes a link between the River Chart and the creation of writing. More precisely, the revelation of the River Chart was the circumstance that enabled Cang Jie first to understand the transformations that occur in Heaven and on the Earth; then to decipher the meanings of the respective signs (*wen* 文) and configurations (*shi* 勢); and finally to use them in order to create writing. The birds' traces were one of the models that Cang Jie took as an example for his achievement.

3.2 *Birds and Bird Script in the Apocrypha: Two Different Narratives*

Several received early texts mention the River Chart and the Luo Writ,³⁵ but the largest amount of details on this subject is provided by the apocryphal fragments, which in this context repeatedly mention birds – a crow (*wu* 烏), a sparrow (*que* 雀), a phoenix (*feng* 鳳), or generically a “bird” (*niao* 鳥) – and the bird script. When the relevant passages are read together, it becomes clear

33 This is, suitably, the constellation that rules on literary compositions and their fortune. See Acker, *Some Tang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, 62.

34 *Chunqiu yuanming bao* 春秋元命包, in *Isho shūsei*, 4A:26. Ya was not far from Baishui 白水, in present-day Shaanxi. On this passage see Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven: Celestial Writing in Six Dynasties Daoism,” 49–51.

35 See Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 297–302; Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 132–44; and Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty and the Rite of Jade Disc Immersion in Weft Narratives,” *passim*.

that they describe two main narratives, which differ on the basis of the recipients of the two documents.

The first narrative concerns the mythical rulers, who receive the Chart and the Writ while they travel along the Yellow or the Luo rivers, or while they perform the “inspection tour” (*xunshou* 巡狩) of their domains. Atmospheric and other phenomena occur: fog, rain, and especially the appearance of a supernatural radiance, white, green, or red in color. In several cases, the emperor performs a ceremony, which mainly consists in casting a jade disc (*bi* 璧) into the river. This was done, in particular, by Yao 堯 and Shun 舜:

堯率群臣，東沈璧於洛，退候至于下稷。赤光起，玄龜負書出，赤文成字。

Leading his ministers, Yao sank a jade disk into the Luo [River] in the east. He withdrew and waited until dusk. A red radiance rose, and a dark turtle bearing a writ emerged. Its red signs formed characters.³⁶

舜沈璧于河，榮光休至。黃龍負卷舒圖，出（入）（水）壇畔。

Shun sank a jade disk into the [Yellow] River. A splendid radiance came as a propitious omen. A yellow dragon carrying a scroll, which unrolled itself into a chart, came forth from the water.³⁷

As a rule, the agents of the revelation are a dragon for the River Chart and a turtle for the Luo Writ. Sometimes a bird also appears – in particular, a phoenix or a black bird;³⁸ other times a fish is said to leap from the river to the site of the

36 *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:77. See Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 156. The sentence “its red signs (*wen* 文) formed characters (*zi* 字)” should be of interest to linguists; see Wm. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*, 138–43 (section entitled “*Wen* 文 and *Tzu* 字”).

37 *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:79. See Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty,” 428–29. For *churu* 出入, I read *chushui* 出水 on the basis of other versions of the same story; see the fragment before this one in *Isho shūsei*, 2:79., and the passage of the *Shangshu zhonghou kao heming* 尚書中侯考河命 quoted in *Isho shūsei*, 2:97. See also Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 156–57.

38 *Chunqiu yundou shu*, in *Isho shūsei*, 4a:155; *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:82 (two fragments; on one of them, see Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 157–58, and Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty,” 429–30).

ceremony;³⁹ and in one case the fish itself, instead of the dragon, is the main agent of the revelation:

天大霧三日。黃帝遊洛水之上，見大魚。殺五牲以醮之。天乃大雨七日七夜。魚流而得河圖。

There was a thick fog in the sky for three days. While Huangdi was traveling along the Luo River, he saw a big fish. He killed five animals to make an offering (*jiao*). Then the sky sent down heavy rain for seven days and seven nights. The fish flowed [to Huangdi] and he received the River Chart.⁴⁰

We shall return to the role of the fish in this context. Either spontaneously or as a result of the ceremony, the emperor receives the Chart and the Writ. The Chart is often said to be written in a “red script” or in “red signs” (*chìwén* 赤文), which sometimes are paired with the equally auspicious green color of the Chart. In other cases, the Chart is entirely red. In a fragment of the *Yundou shu* 運斗樞 (The Pivot of the Rotating Dipper), Emperor Shun receives the Chart in a box engraved with characters written in “bird script”:

圖以黃玉為匣如櫝，長三尺廣八寸厚一寸。四合而連有戶。白玉檢，黃金繩，芝為泥，封兩端，章曰天（黃）（皇）帝符璽五字，廣袤各三寸，深四分，鳥文。

The Chart was in a yellow jade casket similar to a cabinet, 3 feet long, 8 inches wide, and 1 inch thick. On the four sides there were openings connected to one another. It had tablets of white jade and strings of yellow gold, and was sealed on both ends with a mud made of the *zhi*-plant [of immortality]. A five-character inscription read: “Talismanic Seal of the August Emperor of Heaven.” Each [character] measured 3 inches

39 *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:79 and 2:82 (two fragments; see the previous footnote).

40 *Hetu luyun fa* 河圖錄運法, in *Isho shūsei*, 6:100. See Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 155. Hsieh understands the word *liu* 流 as “flowed away.” On the contrary, I understand it as meaning that the flood caused by the providential heavy rain – a result of the “offering” – enabled the fish to reach the shore and deliver the Chart to Huangdi. An almost identical story is quoted from an unidentified “apocryphon on the *Chunqiu*” (“*Chunqiu wei*” 春秋緯) in *Isho shūsei*, 4B:135.

in width and length, had a depth of 4 tenths of an inch, [and was written] in bird script.⁴¹

In another fragment, the River Chart itself, revealed by Heaven, is written in “bird-animal script,” and is complemented by the Luo Writ (here called Tortoise Writ, *guishu* 龜書) delivered by the Earth:

伏犧德洽上下，天應之以鳥獸文章，地應之以龜書。伏犧則而象之，乃作易卦。

Fu Xi’s virtue permeated [Heaven] above and [the Earth] below. Heaven responded with a badge (*zhang*) in bird-animal script (*niaoshou wen*, i.e., the River Chart), and the Earth responded with the Tortoise Writ (i.e., the Luo Writ). Following their examples and using them as models, Fu Xi then made the trigrams of the *Changes*.⁴²

The passage quoted above from the *Yundou shu*, which reports the bestowal of the River Chart to Emperor Shun in a box decorated in “bird script,” continues by giving one of the most detailed descriptions of the supposed material features and contents of the River Chart among the extant apocryphal fragments:

舜與大司空禹臨侯望博等三十人，集發圖，玄色而縹狀可舒，卷長三十二尺，廣九寸。中七十二帝，地形之制，天文宮位度之差。

Shun, the Grand Minister of Works Yu, the Attendant Wang Bo, and others, thirty persons altogether, all gathered in order to extract the Chart. It was of a dark color, made of raw silk, and could be unrolled. The scroll was 32 feet long and 9 inches wide. On it were [depicted] the seventy-two emperors, the outlines (*zhi*) of the forms of the Earth (i.e., *mountains, rivers, etc.*), and the positions of the palaces of the signs of Heaven (i.e., *planets, constellations, etc.*), with their different numbers of degrees (i.e., *their positions in Heaven*).⁴³

41 *Chunqiu yundou shu*, in *Isho shūsei*, 4A:156 (with variant passages in 4A:158–59). See Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 316–17.

42 *Li han wenjia* 禮含文嘉, in *Isho shūsei*, 3:49.

43 *Chunqiu yundou shu*, in *Isho shūsei*, 4A:156. See Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 316–17. The “seventy-two emperors” were the rulers of high antiquity who supposedly performed the Feng and Shan 封禪 ceremonies to Heaven and Earth on Mount Tai (Taishan 泰山).

All examples quoted above mention mythical rulers, and pertain to the first of the two narratives on the revelation of the River Chart and the Luo Writ. The second narrative concerns historical rulers. Apparently with the only exception of King Cheng 成王 of the Zhou (r. 1042/1035–1006 BCE), as we shall presently see, human rulers do not receive the River Chart or the Luo Writ. They receive, instead, a “red script” (*chiwen*) or a “cinnabar writ” (*danshu* 丹書), which is equally revealed as it also comes down from Heaven. The setting is similar – thunders, fires, white and green clouds – but the ruler does not perform a ritual, unless he is said to have “celebrated the rite of Yao and Shun” 舉堯舜禮 by sinking a jade disk into the Yellow River. This is in fact what King Cheng did:

周成王舉堯舜禮，沈璧河。白雲起而青雲浮至，乃有蒼龍，負圖臨河也。

King Cheng of Zhou celebrated the rite of Yao and Shun, and sunk a jade disk into the [Yellow] River. White clouds rose and green clouds came drifting; then there was a green dragon that approached the River carrying the Chart on its back.⁴⁴

Except for this example, the main agents of the revelation to human rulers are a bird (especially a red bird, *chíniao* 赤鳥, or a red sparrow, *chique* 赤雀) and a fish, which replace the dragon and the turtle, respectively. The bird either delivers a text or bears inscriptions on its body:

周文王為西伯，季秋之月甲子，赤雀嚙丹書入豐鄗，止于昌戶。

When King Wen of the Zhou was the Count of the West, on a *jiazi* day of the last month of autumn, a red sparrow holding a cinnabar writ in its beak entered [the capital] Fenghao and alit by Ji Chang’s household.⁴⁵

The same is true of the fish. Like the characters of the River Chart, texts and inscriptions are said to be in “red script” (*chiwen*).⁴⁶

44 *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:86. See Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 158–59; Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty,” 431; and, for the version of the same story in the *Songshu* 宋書 (History of the Liu Song Dynasty), Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China*, 52.

45 *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:83 and 2:84. For the context of this passage see Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty,” 422.

46 *Shangshu zhonghou*, in *Isho shūsei*, 2:84; see Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty,” 424–25.

Perhaps the most noteworthy example of the central role played by birds in the transmission of prophetic writings is recorded in another apocryphon, the *Yan Kong tu* 演孔圖 (Charts for the Application of Confucius' Teaching). After the capture of the unicorn – the episode that, according to tradition, caused Confucius to realize that he would not see his teachings implemented during his lifetime – Heaven sent down a revealed text. This document predicted the death of Confucius and the end of the Zhou dynasty, and advised the people in Lu 魯 (Confucius' native kingdom) immediately to set up laws according to his doctrine, which the Han dynasty in turn would inherit:

得麟之後，天下血書魯端門。曰：趨作法，孔聖沒。周姬亡，彗東出。秦政起，胡破術。書紀散，孔不絕。

After the capture of the unicorn, Heaven sent down a blood-text (*xue-shu*) to the Duan Gate in Lu. It said: "Hasten to make laws, for the sage Confucius will perish. When the Ji [ruling house] of the Zhou will be destroyed, a comet will appear in the East. Zheng of the Qin will rise, and Hu will destroy the arts (*shu*).⁴⁷ Books and records will be scattered, but [the teaching of] Confucius will not be brought to an end."

The "blood text," written – as its name implies – in red characters like the other revealed documents seen above, is a "sworn text" that testifies to a contract between Heaven and humanity: this term draws an analogy between that contract and the enfeoffment rites in early China, where ruler and feudatory sealed their alliance by smearing their mouths with blood.⁴⁸ Remarkably, the text received at the Duan Gate then transformed itself into a red bird, and the bird in turn became the *Yan Kong tu* itself:

子夏明日往視之。血書飛為赤鳥，化為白書。署曰演孔圖，中有作圖制法之狀。

The day after, [Confucius' disciple] Zixia went to look at it. The "blood-text" flew upwards and became a red bird, which then transformed

47 I.e., Ying Zheng 嬴政 and Ying Huhai 嬴胡亥, the first and second emperors of the short-lived Qin dynasty that succeeded the Zhou, respectively. The latter was responsible of the "burning of the books" in 213 BCE, to which the next sentence of this passage alludes.

48 See Stein, "Aspects de la foi jurée en Chine." There are several traces of this rite in the Taoist ceremonies of transmission, where blood however is often replaced by cinnabar, a mineral also of red color. See Stein, "Textes taoïstes relatifs à la transmission des livres révélés," and my *Great Clarity*, 80 and 274 note 2.

itself into a white text.⁴⁹ It bore the words “Charts for the Application of Confucius’ Teaching.” Within it, the conditions for making charts and establishing laws were set forth.⁵⁰

The *Yan Kong tu*, a guide to the application of the laws decreed by Heaven, is therefore a transformation of a bird that in turn was a metamorphosis of a revealed text.

3.3 *Two Related Themes*

It is impossible in the present study to attempt a detailed analysis of the multiple ideas and concepts contained in the apocryphal fragments quoted above.⁵¹ I will, instead, look briefly at two themes related to our present subject.

The first theme concerns the simultaneous presence of a bird and a fish in some of the apocryphal fragments. When they appear, the two animals replace the dragon and the turtle, which in other accounts descend from the sky and emerge from the water, respectively. The fragments, therefore, display two similar configurations, each of which is made of two dyads: heaven-dragon and water-turtle on the one hand, and heaven-bird and water-fish on the other. This suggests that the fish that emerges from the river and leaps onto the ground is the counterpart of the bird that descends from the sky. As such, the fish represents the world below (the waters) as complementary to the world above (heaven). In addition, both configurations refer to a cosmology based on the triad Heaven-Earth-Water. Clear traces of this triad are found in Han-dynasty religious traditions, and later Taoist sources document instances in which not only birds, but also fish bring forth texts and other sacred objects.⁵²

The second theme concerns the red color of the birds, the script, and other objects repeatedly mentioned in the apocryphal fragments on the River Chart and the Luo Writ. This color has multiple associations. First, as is well known, red often has a cosmological and political import: it is the color of Fire, the agent or phase (*xing* 行) usually associated with the Han dynasty, and for this

49 “White text” (*baishu* 白書) almost certainly refers to a text written on silk (*bo* 帛).

50 *Chunqiu yan Kong tu* 春秋演孔圖, in *Isho shūsei*, 4a:14.

51 The studies by Hsieh Shu-wei and Grégoire Espeset quoted in the previous footnotes provide important discussions of these and several other apocryphal fragments, with particular regard to the subjects of revealed writing and the enthronement of mythical and historical rulers, respectively.

52 The Three Offices (*sanguan* 三官) of Heaven, Earth, and Water became especially important in the early Way of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao 天師道). For Taoist revelations given by birds, see Bokenkamp, “The Peach Flower Font and the Grotto Passage”; and by fish, Kim Daeyeol, “Poisson et dragon: Symboles du véhicule entre l’ici-bas et l’au-delà.”

reason it retrospectively predicts the advent of the Han and its legitimacy to rule.⁵³ A fragment of the *Yuanming bao* even states that the red bird – in this case, a phoenix – is a transformation of the trigram Li 離, which is related to Fire:

火離為鳳皇銜〔丹〕書，游文王之都。故武王受鳳書之紀。

The [trigram] Li of Fire became a phoenix that, holding a cinnabar writ in its mouth, traveled to the capital of King Wen. Therefore King Wu received the annals of the phoenix writ.⁵⁴

In other cases, however, the color red has other associations besides the cosmological or political ones. The apocryphal fragments on the River Chart and the Luo Writ contain several terms based on the words *chi* 赤 “red” or “scarlet red,” *zhu* 朱 “vermilion red,” and *dan* 丹 “cinnabar red.” These terms variously refer to writings and texts, such as *chiwen* 赤文 “red script,” *chise* 赤色 “red color” (especially with regard to the color of the River Chart), *chile* 赤勒 “red engravings,” and *danshu* 丹書 “cinnabar writ”; to birds and other animals, such as *zhuniao* 朱鳥 “vermilion bird,” *chiwu* 赤鳥 “red crow,” *chique* 赤雀 “red sparrow,” *chilong* 赤龍 “red dragon,” and *chishe* 赤蛇 “red snake”; and to other auspicious signs, including *zhucuo* 朱草 “vermilion grass,” *chiyu* 赤玉 “red jade,” and *chiguang* 赤光 “red radiance.” In these cases, red is not only an auspicious color, but is in the first place emblematic of what is deemed to be true or authentic (the “blood text” of the Duan Gate pertains to the same theme). This suits the nature of the documents revealed by Heaven, which are, by definition, true.⁵⁵

53 Hsieh Shu-wei, “Writing from Heaven,” 125–29, provides examples from both received texts and apocryphal fragments.

54 *Chunqiu yuanming bao*, in *Isho shūsei*, 4A:31. See Espeset, “Epiphanies of Sovereignty,” 425–26, and his notes on the context of this passage.

55 In his “Le Fenghuang et le phénix,” 6–7, Jean-Pierre Diény suggested that there is more than a cosmological and a political import in the color of the red bird, without elaborating further: “On explique traditionnellement sa couleur rouge en se référant à la couleur emblématique des Zhou et des Han. La signification symbolique de cette couleur est à mon avis très différente, mais je ne puis m’arrêter à ce problème.” Elsewhere, Diény was more explicit, calling the color red “la couleur du sacré.” See the summary of his courses in *École pratique des hautes études, 4^e section, Sciences historiques et philologiques* 18.4 (1994), 167. See also Diény, “Oiseaux,” 474–75, which briefly mentions “les oracles rouges, par lesquels le ciel communique aux hommes sa volonté.” On the symbolism of the color red see also my *Great Clarity*, 68–75, where I suggest that red is emblematic of truth, sincerity, loyalty, and therefore authenticity. Taoist texts contain innumerable mentions of

4 The Winged Men

We may now look at the third major theme closely related to the Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain. Birds are, almost universally, embodiments of the divine or the human spirit and epiphanies of the deity. Examples are numberless. To mention only a few, they range from the dove and the eagle in the Judaic and Christian traditions to the peacock and the owl in Buddhism and the Simurgh of the Sufi *Conference of the Birds*.⁵⁶ This feature in turn pertains to one of the main aspects of the symbolism of birds: being capable of flying upwards to heaven and downwards to the earth, birds represent not only the descent of the divine spirit to the earth, but also the ascent of the human spirit to heaven.

4.1 *Birds, Sages, and Saints*

The two aspects mentioned above are obviously complementary, but at least with regard to China it is possible to draw a significant distinction between them. In his comparative study of the Chinese *fenghuang* 鳳凰 and the Western phoenix, Jean-Pierre Diény noted that the descent of a prophetic bird from heaven to earth signals the achievement of the “culture of the sage.” Diény suggested that “this *fenghuang* is the one of Confucianism”; we might add that it is also the bird of the apocrypha, which delivers celestial writings – often written in “bird script” – to virtuous sovereigns. Diény contrasts this *fenghuang* to a different bird: a bird that “represents the purity, the invulnerability of the saint who flies away from the vulgar world ... a bird that flies freely ... the bird of which Zhuangzi [莊子] or Song Yu [宋玉] describe the journey through space.”⁵⁷ This bird is the Peng 鵬 bird of the *Zhuangzi* – which, significantly in light of what we have seen earlier, is a transformation of a fish. Here again, one might add that this bird is both an image and a model of the Taoist saint who overcomes the limitations of the ordinary world, similar to a bird that rises in flight following, whenever possible, nothing but the movement of the winds.⁵⁸

objects that are red or are written in red; in particular, talismans (*fu* 符) and the elixir itself, whose name, not by coincidence, literally means “cinnabar red” (*dan* 丹).

56 For an overview and several other examples, see Waida, “Birds.”

57 Diény, “Le Fenghuang et le phénix,” translated from p. 11.

58 “In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun 鯀. The Kun is so huge I don’t know how many thousand *li* he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng 鵬.” *Zhuangzi*, 1.1a; trans. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 29 (transliteration modified). The “Dui Chuwang wen” 對楚王問 poem by Song Yu (third century BCE) establishes the same parallel between the phoenix and the Kun fish: “Among the birds there is the Feng (*i.e.*, the phoenix), and among the fish there is the Kun.” See Diény, “Le Fenghuang et le phénix,” 6, note 18.

In Taoism, one of the terms that designate the attainment of immortality is “winged transformation” (*yuhua* 羽化), and the accomplishment of transcendence is often represented by the image of the growth of wings, usually as a result of inner practices or – especially in the earlier traditions – of the ingestion of elixirs or other supernatural substances. To give one example, in a source dating from no later than 300 CE we read:

又取金水汞水各一兩，向日飲之。立為金人，身則光明，羽翼即生。

Moreover, take one ounce each of Gold Water (*jinshui*, also called Golden Liquor, *jinye* 金液) and Mercury Water (*hongshui*), and drink them facing the sun. You will immediately become a Golden Man (*jinren*). Your body will be radiant and will grow feathers and wings.⁵⁹

Birds, therefore, are closely related to the *xian* 仙 or *xianren* 仙人, the Taoist “immortals” or “transcendents.” Dictionaries of premodern Chinese define *xian* 僊 (an early form of the currently-used graph) as a verb meaning “to rise in flight by waving the sleeves” 舞袖飛揚 (that is, the arms) in a way similar to wings.⁶⁰ The upward flight is not only understood as the ascent of spirit to Heaven, but is also described as an advancement (*qian* 遷, another related graph) in spiritual rank, resulting in the obtainment of a position in the Taoist celestial bureaucracy as an assistant to the gods.

We shall return later to the term *xian* or *xianren*, but here we should note that between the birds and the immortals there is an intermediate figure: the *yuren* 羽人, or “winged man.” We know virtually nothing about the nature of these extraordinary beings, which are both humans and birds. All we can say is that they are not, like the immortals, humans who have transformed themselves into birds: the winged men have enjoyed their status since the origin. They have no history, and therefore, unlike the human immortals, they are not the subjects of hagiographies. They are not even saints, but the predecessors of the Taoist saints.

4.2 *Early Sources on the Winged Men*

Early sources contain a few mentions of the winged men. The most important and best-known reference is found in the “Yuanyou” 遠遊 (Far Roaming) poem, attributed to Qu Yuan 屈原 (late fourth century BCE) but perhaps dating from

59 *Baopu zi shenxian jinzhuo jing*, 7a–b; trans. Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 210.

60 This definition, given by Duan Yucai in his *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 8A.38b (p. 383), s.v. *xian* 僊, is often quoted in later works.

the second century BCE. Here the poet meets the winged men who live on the Cinnabar Hill (*danqiu* 丹丘, a place defined by its red color) at the beginning of his journey through the cosmos, which allows him to meet realized beings and visit celestial palaces, and ultimately to enter the realm of the Great Beginning (*taichu* 泰初).

聞至貴而遂徂兮，忽乎吾將行。仍羽人於丹丘兮，留不死之舊鄉。朝濯髮於湯谷兮，夕晞余身兮九陽。

When I had heard the Most Esteemed One, I then proceeded –
Oblivious of whither I would be going.

I continued on to the feathered persons [*or*: “the winged men,” *yuren*] at
the Hill of Cinnabar –

Loitered in the long-standing land where death is not;

At dawn washed my hair in the Vale of Sunshine –

And at dusk dried myself in the realm of Ninefold Sunlight ...⁶¹

The *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (Book of the Mountains and the Seas, second–first century BCE or earlier) mentions instead the Winged People, or *yumin* 羽民, saying that “they have long heads, and feathers grow on their bodies.”⁶² Another description is given by Wang Chong, who censures the view that immortals grow wings, but not the belief in the existence of the Winged People. Despite its skeptical tone, the passage is important for the details it provides on the relation between birds and immortals:

圖仙人之形，體生毛，臂變為翼，行於雲，則年增矣，千歲不死。此虛圖也。世有虛語，亦有虛圖。假使之然，蟬蛾之類，非真正人也。海外三十五國，有毛民、羽民，羽則翼矣。毛羽之民，土形所出，非言為道身生毛羽也。... 不死之民，亦在外國，不言有毛羽。毛羽之

61 *Chuci*, 5.5a–b; trans. Kroll. “On ‘Far Roaming.’” See also Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 71–72.

62 *Shanhai jing*, 6.1b; trans. Mathieu, *Étude sur la mythologie et l’ethnologie de la Chine ancienne*, vol. 1, *Traduction annotée du Shanhai jing*, 375. I am grateful to Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann for this reference. See also the illustration reproduced from a Qing-dynasty edition in Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary*, 162–63. Among other early sources that mention the Winged People is the *Huainan zi*, 4.8b: “Beyond the sea there are thirty-six kingdoms.... In the region stretching from the southwest to the southeast there are the Bound-Breast People and the Winged People ...” 凡海外三十六國 ... 自西南至東南方，結胸民，羽民 ... See Le Blanc and Mathieu, *Huainan zi*, 178–79, and Major et al., *The Huainanzi*, 166.

民，不言不死；不死之民，不言毛羽。毛羽未可以效不死，仙人之有翼，安足以驗長壽乎？

In picturing the bodily forms of the immortals, their bodies are covered with feathers, their arms are changed into wings, and they are shown flying in the sky; this would mean that the length of their life has increased and they live one thousand years without dying. Those are false pictures: just like in the world there are false speeches, so there are also false pictures. And even assuming that they are true, creatures like cicadas and moths are not actual human beings. In the thirty-five kingdoms beyond the sea there are the Feathered People (*maomin*) and the Winged People (*yumin*).⁶³ *Yu* 羽 means “wings.” The Feathered and the Winged peoples are produced by the configuration of the land; it does not mean that their bodies grow feathers and wings because they practice the Dao.... Those who do not die are also found in foreign countries, but this does not mean that they have feathers and wings. That there are the Feathered and the Winged peoples does not mean that they do not die; and vice versa, that there are people who do not die does not mean that they have feathers and wings. If feathers and wings are not signs of immortality, how can the wings of the immortals be sufficient evidence of their longevity?⁶⁴

While the logical reasoning expressed in this passage may be flawless, it is unclear whether the Feathered People and the Winged People mentioned both by Wang Chong and in the *Shanhai jing* are provided with the most important feature of the winged men: the ability to fly and to serve as intermediaries between Heaven and mankind. Their physical features appear to be, rather, signs of their “otherness” compared to the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom. In any case, descriptions or mentions of the winged men seem to disappear after these early mentions. In later Taoist texts, the term *yuren* appears frequently, but is essentially only a synonym of *xianren*, “immortal” or “transcendent.”

4.3 A Typology

The best-known graphic depictions of the winged men are probably those found on the walls of the Wu Liang Shrines 武梁祠 in the present-day Jiexiang

63 Compare the “thirty-six kingdoms” of the *Huainan zi* passage quoted in the previous footnote.

64 *Lunheng*, “Wuxing 無形,” 2.62; see Forke, *Lun-hêng*, 1:330–31. In his learned notes on this passage, the editor Huang Hui 黃暉 quotes several other relevant sources.



FIGURE 2.6 Winged Men surrounding Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa (Nügua) 女媧. Wu Liang Shrines 武梁祠
SOURCE: WU HONG, *THE WU LIANG SHRINES*, 247

嘉祥 district of Shandong (fig. 2.6).⁶⁵ Archeology, however, has brought to light several other images.⁶⁶ These images suggest that *yuren* is actually a general designation for different hybrid avian-human beings. In a short note on this subject, Wei Feixue has established a basic typology.⁶⁷ Drawing in part from his classification, the main types of *yuren* may be described as follows:

1. Human head, human body, wings. These are the winged men in the most literal sense of the term. They have slim bodies with wings on their backs, and their human faces are characterized by long ears, large eyebrows, and prominent lips. (Fig. 2.7)

65 See Watson, *The Arts of China to AD 900*, 97–99 and 110; Wu Hong, *The Wu Liang Shrines*, esp. 72–73; and Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China*, 67–72.

66 A remarkable graphic apparatus on the winged men is found in Wallace, “Betwixt and Between: Depictions of Immortals (*Xian*) in Eastern Han Tomb Reliefs”; and an even more copious one is found in Wu Ping, “Handai huaxiangshi yuren tuxiang yanjiu.” For bronze and jade artifacts, see Waterbury, *Bird-Deities in China*, tables xvii–xxxii. Here I can only note in passing that, in some of their representations, the winged men bear evident analogies to some of the Hindu and Buddhist (in particular, Chinese Buddhist) *apsaras*, or *feitian* 飛天. See Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 144–46.

67 Wei Feixue, “Handai yuren de fenlei.” Wei’s classification is based on Han-dynasty artifacts – mostly unearthed in Sichuan and Shandong – and secondarily on literary records. In the present essay, figs. 2.8 and 2.9 document the existence of analogous imagery in a much earlier period.

2. Human head, bird's body. This matches the classical definition of the "man-bird," said to have "a human face and a bird's body" (*renmian niaoshen* 人面鳥身). (Fig. 2.8)
3. Hybrid human-bird head, human body. The body is clearly human, but the head is a hybrid: it has human ears and a bird's beak. (Fig. 2.9)

Several other representations of winged men are found on bronze mirrors.⁶⁸ One of them (figs. 2.10b and 2.10c) is especially interesting for two reasons. First, this may be the only case in which it possible to identify the two *yuren* shown on the mirror: they appear to be Chisong zi 赤松子 (or 赤誦子) and Wangzi Qiao 王子橋, who became well-known immortals in the later Taoist traditions. Second, and especially significant in light of what we have seen above, in addition to the winged men and to images of birds, this mirror also contains the image of a fish.

The two winged men in this mirror are depicted as playing *liubo* 六博, the so-called "divination game" that was especially widespread during the Han period (fig. 2.11).⁶⁹ In several other cases, the winged men play *liubo* on Mount Kunlun 崑崙山 in the presence of the Xiwangmu 西王母 or Queen Mother of the West, the deity who, in the Han period, was the goddess of the immortals (we shall meet her again later). One of the pictures, in particular, shows her and the winged men surrounded by a three-legged crow, a hare holding the *zhi*-plant of immortality, a toad, and a nine-tailed fox (fig. 2.12). Other illustrations consists of remarkable depictions of winged men who seem to carry in their wombs two of the emblems just mentioned: the crow in the Sun and the hare in the Moon (figs. 2.13 and 2.14).

Finally, we should note that one of the ways in which the image of the winged man, or the man-bird, was incorporated into Taoism is under the shape of deities. The *Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 (Central Scripture of Laozi) describe the highest inner deity, Shangshang Taiyi 上上太一 (Most High Great One), by saying: "This god has the head of a man and the body of a bird, and his shape is similar to a rooster or a phoenix."⁷⁰ In meditation practices, the "true form" (*zhenxing*) of Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao) should be visualized as provided with the beak of a bird, an arched nose, bushy eyebrows, and long ears – the same features of the winged men.⁷¹

68 Waterbury, *Bird-Deities in China*, tables XXXIII–LIX *passim*.

69 The precise rules of the *liubo* game are unknown, but Lilian Tseng appears to have gone as close as possible to identifying them through a close analysis of the "TLV" divination board unearthed in 1993 in Yinwan 引灣, Jiangsu. See Tseng, "Representation and Appropriation: Rethinking the TLV Mirror in Han China," 169–91.

70 *Laozi zhongjing*, 1.1a.

71 *Baopu zi neipian*, 15.273.



FIGURE 2.7 Winged Man. Western Han (second–first c. BCE). Bronze, height 15,3 cm. Xi'an
 西安 (Shaanxi). Xi'an Museum 西安博物院
 SOURCE: LU DIMIN 路迪民 AND WANG DAYE 王大业, *ZHONGGUO GUDAI
 YEJIN YU JINSHU WENWU* 中国古代冶金与金属文物, 203



FIGURE 2.8 Winged Man. Shang dynasty (ca. fourteenth c. BCE). Bronze. Sanxingdui 三星堆 (Sichuan). Sanxingdui Museum 三星堆博物館



FIGURE 2.9
Winged Man. Shang period (ca. fourteenth
c. BCE). Jade, height 11,5 cm. Xingan xian
新干縣 (Jiangxi). Jiangxi Provincial
Museum 江西省博物館

This, however, is not the aspect under which the man-bird is related to the Taoist Man-Bird Mountain. The Man-Bird Mountain is not a mountain inhabited by a man-bird: it is a mountain “in the image of a man and in the form of a bird.” In other words, the Man-Bird Mountain is a mountain shaped as a man-bird.

5 The Man-Bird Mountain

As I mentioned at the beginning, the Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain exists in two versions, the second of which – found in a Taoist compendium dating from the early eleventh century – is shown in fig. 2.15.⁷² In this version, the bird is not visible and the two external bands inscribed with characters are omitted. Instead, a horizontal band shows eleven characters written in a pseudo-archaic script, similar to those found in many Taoist texts (in particular, the “cloud-seal script,” *yunzhuan shu* 雲篆書, and the script of many talismans).⁷³

72 The second version is found in the *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu* 元覽人鳥山形圖 (Chart of the [True] Form of the Man-Bird Mountain for the Contemplation of the Origin), in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.19b–24a.

73 The Taoist Canon also contains a third chart featuring a bird. Found in the *Qusu jueci lu* 曲素訣辭錄 (Register for the Instructions on the Emanations from the Labyrinth), 3a, this spectacular picture shows a bird surrounded by a tangled network of lines and signs – many of which resemble, again, those used in Taoist talismans – with dozens of names



FIGURE 2.10A
 Winged Men on a bronze mirror. Eastern Han (first–second c. CE). Bronze. Shaoxing 紹興 (Zhejiang)
 SOURCE: OKAMURA HIDENORI, “GOKANKYŌ NI OKERU WAI-HA TO GO-HA”, 516



FIGURES 2.10B AND 2.10C Details of previous picture

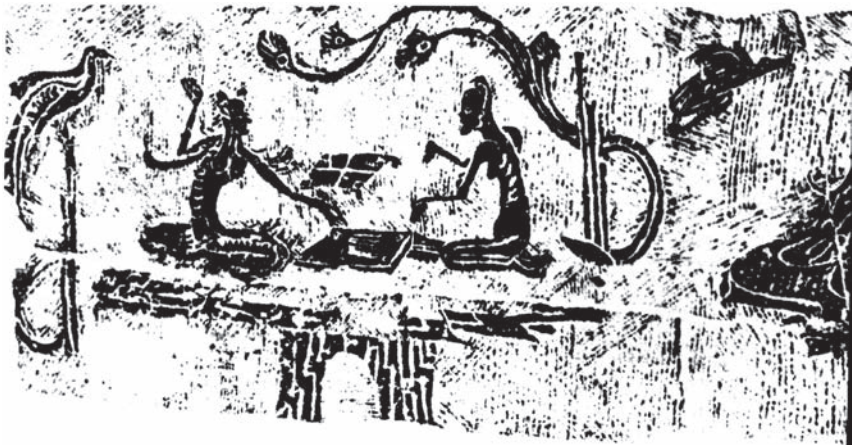


FIGURE 2.11 Winged Men playing the *liubo* game. Eastern Han (first–second c. CE). 57 × 99 cm. Xinjin 新津 (Sichuan)
 SOURCE: GAO WEN, *ZHONGGUO HUAXIANGSHI QUANJI*, 7:165–66



FIGURE 2.12 Winged Men and the Queen Mother of the West. Eastern Han (first–second c. CE).
41 × 47 cm. Qingbaixiang 清白乡, Xindu 新都 (Sichuan)
SOURCE: JESSICA RAWSON, *MYSTERIES OF ANCIENT CHINA*, 197



FIGURE 2.13
Winged Man bearing the “crow
in the sun.” Eastern Han (first-
second c. CE). Pengxian 彭縣
(Sichuan)

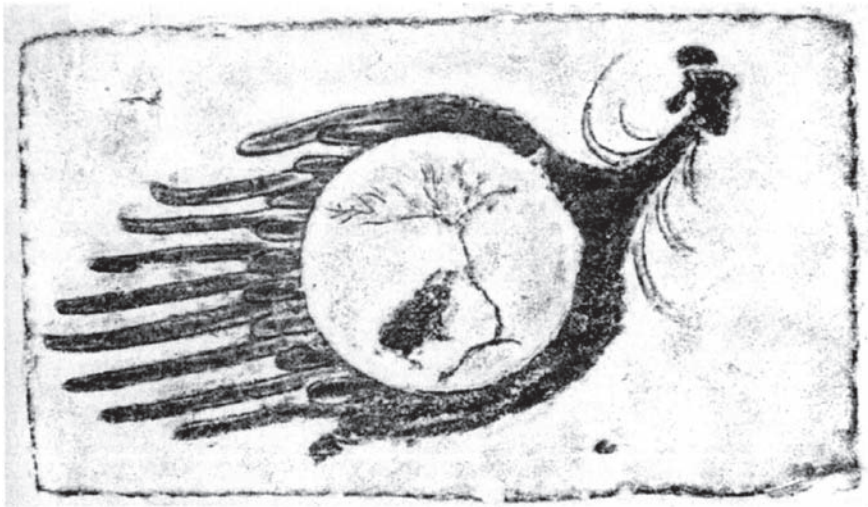


FIGURE 2.14 Winged Man bearing the “hare in the moon.” Eastern Han (first-second c. CE). Xindu 新都 (Sichuan)

5.1 *The Mountain*

The text containing the first version of the Chart mentions six other names of the Man-Bird Mountain. Among them are Mount Xuanpu 玄圃 (Mysterious Garden), which in turn is an alternative name of Mount Kunlun, placed at the center of the world; and Mount Xumi 須彌 (Sumeru), the Indian cosmic mountain and *axis mundi*.⁷⁴ However, the Man-Bird Mountain is more than a “cosmic mountain”: it is the place from where the whole cosmos is generated. John Lagerwey has called it “the symbol of all symbols,” adding that “it is the symbol of the matrix itself, of the womb of the body of the universe ... from which issue, over time, all the possible transformations of primordial energy.”⁷⁵

Each Heaven has a Man-Bird Mountain, and each mountain is inhabited by gods and grows plants and medicines of long life and immortality. Finding only one of these mountains enables one to know all the others:

太上曰：無數諸天，各有人鳥之山，有人之象，有鳥之形，峰巖峻極，不可勝言。玄臺寶殿，尊神所居，林澗鳥獸，木石香花，芝草眾藥，不死之津，長生之液，又難具陳，陳之無益於學。學者自應精尋，得一知萬，了然究知。

The Most High said: Each of the innumerable Heavens has a Man-Bird Mountain, which is in the image of a man and in the form of a bird. Its peaks are soaring, its height is towering. It is beyond description. Its mysterious terraces and precious halls are inhabited by venerable gods. One could hardly enumerate its forests and ravines, birds and animals, trees and stones, fragrant flowers, plants of immortality, medicines of all kinds, its sap of immortality and its liquor of long life. And even if they were enumerated, this would be of no use for students: they should earnestly

of deities inscribed among them. The text does not provide indications on the meaning of the picture, but Kristofer Schipper calls it “a remarkable and, to judge by the names of the deities it contains, probably ancient document.” See Schipper and Verellen, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*, 1:607, which contains a reproduction of the chart.

74 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu* (DZ 434), 5b (not found in the *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*). See J. M. Boltz, “Cartography in the Daoist Canon,” 31, and Raz, “Daoist Sacred Geography,” 1439. The other names are Mountain of the Golden Root of the Great Earth 大地金根山, Mountain of Fundamental Non-Being and Wondrous Mystery 本無妙玄山, Mountain of the Treasure Cavern of Original Breath 元氣寶洞山, and Divine and Mysterious Mountain for the Contemplation of Heaven in Seven Transformations and Seven Recitations 神玄七變七轉觀天山. (On the meaning of the last name, see Robinet, *La Révélation du Shangqing dans l'histoire du taoïsme*, 2:145 and 2:147–48.)

75 Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 162.



FIGURE 2.15 The Man-Bird Mountain. “Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu,” in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.19b–24a

seek it on their own. When one of them is found, one knows ten thousand. Then a student will truly know everything.⁷⁶

This spaceless place is to be found and contemplated in meditation. When, by means of his practice, the *qi* of the mountain descends on the adept, he will be able to soar above the cosmos:

其表異相，其迹殊姿，皆是妙氣化而成焉。玄達之思，閉目見之，周覽既畢，行之有徵。妙氣既降，肉身能飛，久鍊得妙，肉去妙充。其翔似鳥，山遊三界之外，其神真人，入宴三清之中。

Its outer appearance has strange forms, and its contours are especially extraordinary. They are all produced by the transformations of its wondrous *qi*. In mysteriously penetrating meditation you see it with your eyes closed; when its contemplation is completed, this practice will yield

76 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu*, 1a; corresponding to *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*, in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.19a. See Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 162.

results.⁷⁷ After its wondrous *qi* has descended upon you, you will be able to fly in your body of flesh; and when, by prolonged refinement, you obtain its wondrousness, your flesh will disappear and you will be filled by that wondrousness. You will fly like a bird and roam among the mountains outside the Three Worlds (*sanjie*). Your spirit will be that of a realized man (*zhenren*), and you will enter and feast in the Heavens of the Three Clarities (*sanqing*).⁷⁸

Through his practice, therefore, the adept himself will become a man-bird.

The text also devotes much space to descriptions of two rites. The first is an “offering” (*jiao* 醮) rite to be performed once a year. On a night of full moon, the adept should place the Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain on a mirror, at the center of a purified ritual area in an open courtyard. Offering liquor, food, and incense, he invokes the deities so that they let him achieve the Dao and become an immortal. In the second rite, after a “pure fast” (*qingzhai* 清齋) of one thousand days, the adept draws the Chart in cinnabar-red ink on a piece of thin paper measuring three by five inches, and ingests it. This rite should be performed three times. The first time, the adept acquires long life; the second, he becomes an immortal and “rises in flight”; and the third, “he joins with the Dao.”⁷⁹

As we have seen in a passage quoted earlier, the Man-Bird Mountain is said to contain peaks, ravines, precipices, and pathways. More exactly, the Man-Bird Mountain is made of several mountains. We might compare this description to two pictures found in the Taoist Canon – here again, in fact, two versions of the same picture – which appear to show a mountain, but actually represent the human body (fig. 2.16).⁸⁰ The word *xian* 仙 “immortal” or “transcendent” is also written 仙. Both graphs show a “man” (人) and a “mountain” (山). When the two components are taken together, they do not simply represent a man on a mountain, but a man who *is* a mountain. Just like the Man-Bird Mountain is

77 This sentence, containing the words *xuan* 玄 (“mysterious”) and *lan* 覽 (“contemplation”), clarifies the sense of the complete title of the text, *Scripture and Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain for the Contemplation of the Mystery*.

78 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu*, 1a–b; corresponding to *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*, in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.20a. See Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 162. The Three Clarities are the highest Taoist deities, as well as the heavens that they inhabit.

79 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu*, 2b–4b; corresponding to *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*, in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.21b–24a. See Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 163–64. On these portions of the text, see also Wang Haoyue, “Zaoqi Daojiao jiaoji yu zhaifa xiang ronghe de kaocha: Yi ‘Renniao shan jiaoji’ wei li.”

80 The picture on the left is found in the *Jindan dayao tu*, 3a. The one on the right is found in the *Duren shangpin miaojing neiyi*, 8a–b. For details on these pictures, see Despeux, *Taoism and Self Knowledge: The Chart for the Cultivation of Perfection* (Xiuzhen tu), 29–33.

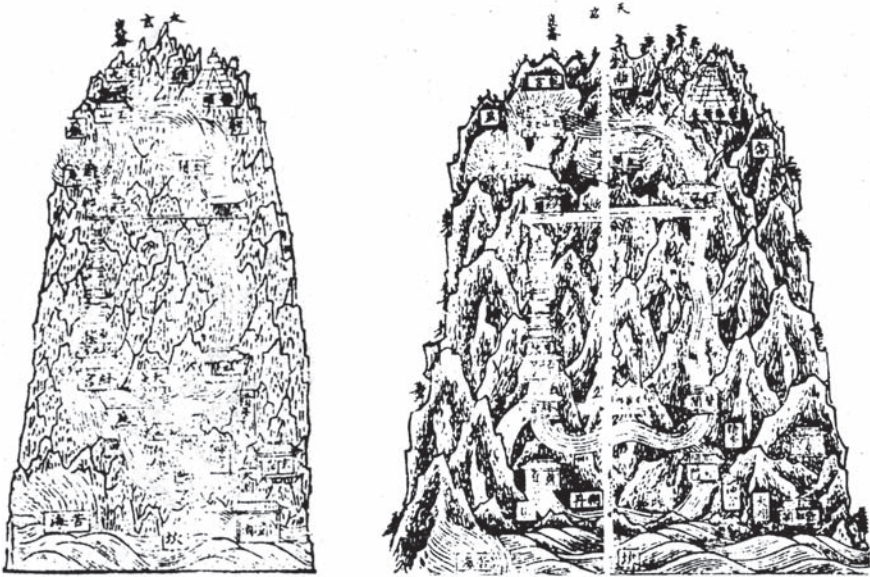


FIGURE 2.16 The human body as a mountain. Left: *Jindan dayao tu*, 3a. Right: *Duren shangpin miaojing neiyi*, 8a–b

the “true form” of the macrocosm, the mountain shown in both pictures is the “true form” of the human microcosm.

5.2 *The Inscriptions*

One of main features of the two charts of the Man-Bird Mountain is their relation to “primordial writing” and to the role played by birds in its revelation. Having described the features of the mountain and the related ritual practices, the text containing the first version of the Chart ends by mentioning two writings. The first is made of eleven “spontaneously-generated characters” (*ziran zhi zi* 自然之字), which are found “within the mountain”:

山內自然之字，一十有一。其訣口中寄文附出：弓龍行，神出，除凶殃，辟非祥。

Within the mountain, the spontaneously-generated characters are eleven. A representative text (*jīwen*) for the oral recitation of its formula is appended here: “Bow (弓)-shaped dragons move around, and deities emerge; dreadful calamities are eliminated, and the ominous is dispelled.”⁸¹

81 For the “bow (弓)-shaped dragons,” compare fig. 2.5 above.

I will presently return to the meaning of “representative text” (*jiwen* 寄文) in this passage. The second writing, instead, is made of 244 “characters [suspended] in emptiness” (*kongxu zhi zi* 空虛之字), which are found “outside the mountain”:

山外空虛之字，向左百二十四，向右百二十，合二百四十四字。誦之在心，訣在師口。

Outside the mountain, the characters [suspended] in emptiness are 124 towards the left, and 120 towards the right; altogether they are 244 characters. Chant them in your heart. The instructions are given orally by a master.⁸²

These two passages refer to the inscriptions found in the two versions of the Chart (figs. 2.1 and 2.15). Concerning the first one, it is almost inevitable to suppose that the eleven “spontaneously-generated characters” mentioned here are those shown in the second version of the Chart, which are indeed pictured “within the mountain.” The characters themselves are unintelligible, but the black-and-white cloud-like patterns subdivide them into four groups respectively made, from right to left, of 3, 2, 3, and 3 characters, which correspond in the passage quoted above to the number of characters in each of the four sentences of the “representative text” (i.e., 弓龍行，神出，除凶殃，辟非祥). These characters are used to transcribe a formula that the practitioner should recite. This means that, although the eleven characters form a meaningful sentence, they are actually nothing more than a “representative text” meant to transcribe the sounds that the adept should speak in his practice. The same seems to be true of the inscriptions that surround the first version of the Chart, which require “instructions given orally by a master” in order to be properly understood.⁸³

The second passage, instead, concerns the characters found in the first version of the Chart, which indeed are shown in the two outer bands “outside the mountain.” In the received text, both the outer and the inner bands contain 122 characters (instead of 120 and 124, respectively), but their total does correspond to 244 characters.⁸⁴ The text in both bands, which has a clear

82 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu*, 6b (not found in the *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*). On the two passages see Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 152.

83 Needless to say, this may also be the case of other “spells” (*zhou* 咒) found in Taoist texts.

84 Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 165, suggests that two characters are missing in the received text of the inner band. See note 94 below.

antecedent in a passage of the *Baopu zi* 抱朴子,⁸⁵ is translated in the appendix to the present article. It begins by saying that the Man-Bird Mountain is “neither in heaven nor on earth, neither under the waters nor above the waters,” and continues by describing its landscape, made of unending ravines and steep precipices, imposing peaks and rugged pathways. On it, one finds the jade liquor and the *zhi*-plants, springs of nectar and crimson trees whose fruits are pearls. One more detail is noteworthy in the context of our subject: the birds found on this mountain – and even its trees – “can speak.”

5.3 *Revealed Texts: From “Writings Carved into Emptiness” to the Taoist Canon*

In his study on the “true form” (*zhenxing*), Kristofer Schipper has pointed out the relation that exists between images like the Chart of the Man-Bird Mountain and writing:

The True Form of a mountain is its shape as seen from the viewpoint of the gods, from above. It is the pattern of ridges and valleys, which is *the spontaneous writing, the sign, and the signature*, and also the manifestation of the power of the mountain. Stretching the semantics a bit further, we may say that *the graphs express the soul of the landscape*.⁸⁶

Giving substance to this description, both texts that contain the Chart emphasize the association between the Man-Bird Mountain and writing:

妙氣結字，聖匠寫之，以傳上學，不泄中人。妙氣之字，即是山容。

The wondrous *qi* [of the Mountain] coagulates into characters, and the saintly craftsmen (*shengjiang*) write them in order to transmit them to superior students. They are not to be divulged to ordinary people. The characters made of the wondrous *qi* are the visible manifestation of the mountain.⁸⁷

The written characters produced by the mountain are as primordial as the mountain itself: to borrow Schipper’s term, they are its “soul.” This feature can be traced to the early Taoist view on the origins of revealed scriptures: they

85 *Baopu zi neipian*, 6.128.

86 Schipper, “The True Form,” 103 (italics added).

87 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu*, 1a; corresponding to *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*, in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.19a–b. See Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 162.

emerge simultaneously with the generation of the cosmos, and are produced by the coagulation of Original Breath (*yuanqi* 元氣) into characters. What makes the Mountain of the Man-Bird unique is that here we have a symbolic place in which the spontaneous generation of scriptures occurs.

The two texts on the Man-Bird Mountain recount how those primordial characters were “carved into emptiness.” It is in this context that we meet again the Queen Mother of the West. Now, however, she is not only the early goddess of the immortals: she is incorporated into the Taoist pantheon as a disciple of the highest deity, Yuanshi tianwang 元始天王, the Celestial King of the Original Beginning. When the Queen Mother completed her study of the Dao, both she and the Celestial King wrote characters, each of which measured one squared *zhang* (about 3 × 3 meters), carving them “into the emptiness” on the Man-Bird Mountain for transmission to the later students of the Dao. Those characters “are still preserved in the present day”:

西王母初學道，詣元始天王，三千年道成德就，應還崑崙之山。臨去辭元始天王，共刻銘人鳥山上虛空之中，製作文字。字方一丈，懸在空中，以接後學，于今存焉。

When she began to study the Dao, the Queen Mother of the West went to see the Celestial King of the Original Beginning. After 3,000 years, when the Dao was attained and its Virtue was achieved, she was bound to return to Mount Kunlun. Ready to depart, she took leave of the Celestial King of the Original Beginning. Together, they carved an inscription into the emptiness above the Man-Bird Mountain. They wrote characters, each of which measured one square *zhang*, and hung them in the void for transmission to students of later times. They are still preserved in the present day.⁸⁸

As was shown by Judith Boltz, this episode is also narrated, in longer or shorter versions and with variants of detail, in other Taoist sources. In particular, the characters inscribed by the Celestial King and the Queen Mother are now found in some of the main revealed scriptures of the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) corpus, including the *Dadong zhenjing* 大洞真經 (True Scripture of the Great Cavern) and the *Basu jing* 八素經 (Scripture of the Eight Pure Ladies).⁸⁹

88 *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu*, 2a; corresponding to *Yuanlan renniao shan xingtu*, in *Yunji qiqian*, 80.21a–b. See Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 163.

89 J. M. Boltz, “Cartography in the Daoist Canon,” 24–26. An analysis of this and other closely related passages found in different Taoist sources is found in Luo Yiyang, “*Xuanlan renniao*

This is not all. Another Shangqing source, the *Yujing baojue* 玉經寶訣 (Precious Instructions on the Jade Scriptures), states that “wondrous *qi*” of the Man-Bird Mountain produced something even more important than those scriptures:

綠那羅衛之國，崑崙人鳥之山，元始天王所別治，七寶宮室，高臺凌天。西王母初學道亦登此山。其上三洞經悉具，書虛中作經，一字方一丈也。是山真形圖至重，服佩便得三洞之玄真矣。

In the kingdom of Lunaluwei there is the Bird-Man Mountain of Kunlun, which is the other seat of the Celestial King of the Original Beginning.⁹⁰ Its palaces and chambers are made of the seven jewels, and its high terraces rise up to heaven. When the Queen Mother of the West began to study the Dao, she ascended this mountain. On its top there are the complete scriptures of the Three Caverns, fashioned as scriptures carved into emptiness, with each character measuring one square *zhang*. The Chart of the True Form of this mountain is extremely important. Have it on you and you will attain the mystery and the truth of the Three Caverns.⁹¹

The “wondrous *qi*” of the mountain produced therefore all works of the Three Caverns (*sandong* 三洞), the three main sections of the Taoist Canon in medieval times. The Man-Bird Mountain, in other words, does not only give origin to “writings carved into emptiness”: it is the source of the entire Taoist teaching.

6 Conclusion

This concludes our account of a story that begins with birds leaving traces on the earthly ground. Those signs, read and understood by the founders of Chinese civilization, are at the origins of human writing. Later, birds deliver prophetic texts, written in their own script, to mythical and historical rulers. Their role as intermediaries between Heaven and humanity was continued by the winged men, whose bodies combine the features of birds and humans. With the Man-Bird Mountain, scriptures are revealed from the body of the

shan jingtu chengshu niandai, shenxue sixiang kaolun,” 137–40.

90 Probably “other seat” compared to the Daluo 大羅 Heaven, which is the ordinary residence of the Celestial King.

91 *Shangqing taiji yinzhuyujing baojue*, 9a. Other Taoist sources record the name Lunaluwei as Yuannaluwei 緣那羅衛 and Niweiluoluna 尼維羅綠那. I am indebted to J. M. Boltz, “Cartography,” note 83, for these references.

Man-Bird itself. Those who find this mountain rise to heaven like birds and become Winged Men. The distinct stages of this story differ from each other but are deeply related to one another: just like the winged creatures flying between heaven and earth did at the beginning of human history, the Man-Bird Mountain reveals in writing the word of the world above us.

Appendix: The Inscriptions

Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu 玄覽人鳥山經圖 (DZ 434)

Other translations of the two inscriptions are found in Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 165, and Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 147–49. Abbreviations: Bpz = 抱朴子; Dbj = 上清道寶經; om. = omitted

(1) Outer Band

1 太上人鳥之山, 2 峻而難踰。3 不天不地, 4 不沈不浮。5 絕險綿邈, 6 崔嵬崎嶇。7 元炁煙燼, 8 神真是遊。9 玉液泓澄, 10 灌溉靡伏。11 百二十官, 12 天府相由。13 日月昏明, 14 玄芝萬株。15 絳樹特生, 16 真實皆珠。17 白玉嵯峨, 18 醴泉出隅。19 雲出芝生, 20 震滅邪驅。21 木鳥能語, 22 此是神夫。23 還年之士, 24 挹其芳流。25 子能得之, 26 真人可儔, 27 不知此道, 28 萬為土灰。29 口耳之經, 30 名為天樓。

Variants

1 夫太元之山 Bpz, 太上人鳥山 Dbj || 2 難知易求 Bpz, om. Dbj || 5 om. Dbj || 6 崔: 嶧 Bpz; om. Dbj || 7 元炁: 和氣 Bpz, 元氣 Dbj; 煙燼: 網緝 Bpz, 火煙 Dbj || 8 神意並游 Bpz || 9 液: 井 Bpz Dbj; 澄: 邃 Bpz || 10 靡伏: 匪休 Bpz, 靡休 Dbj || 12 天府: 曹府 Bpz; 由: 通 Dbj || 13 離坎列位 Bpz || 16 真: 其 Bpz Dbj; 珠: 殊 Bpz || 17 白: 金 Bpz || 19–22 om. Bpz Dbj || 23 om. Dbj || 24 芳: 清 Bpz; om. Dbj || 25 得: 修 Bpz; om. Dbj || 26 真人: 喬松 Bpz; om. Dbj || 27–30 om. Bpz Dbj

Translation

1	太上人鳥之山,	The mountain of the most high Man-Bird –
2	峻而難踰。	steep and difficult to cross;
3	不天不地,	neither in heaven nor on earth,
4	不沈不浮。	neither under the waters nor above the waters.

- 5 絕險綿邈， Ravines and precipices are unending,
6 崔嵬崎嶇。 peaks are imposing, paths are rugged;
7 元炁煙燼， in the Original Breath, misty and enshrouding,
8 神真是遊。 this is where the divine realized ones roam.
- 9 玉液泓澄， Jade Liquor, clear and limpid,
10 灌溉靡休。 irrigates without pause;⁹²
11 百二十官， one hundred and twenty officers
12 天府相由。 follow one another in the celestial courts.
- 13 日月昏明， There are the Sun and the Moon that make dusk and
light,
14 玄芝萬株。 and ten thousand mysterious *zhi*-plants;
15 絳樹特生， a crimson tree grows alone,
16 其實皆珠。 all of its fruits are pearls.⁹³
- 17 白玉嵯峨， All through sharp peaks of white jade,
18 醴泉出隅。 springs of nectar flow at each corner;
19 雲出芝生， clouds emerge and *zhi*-plants grow,
20 震滅邪驅。 thunders come to an end and evil scatters.
- 21 木鳥能語， Trees and birds can speak –
22 此是神夫。 such is its divine power;
23 還年之士， the masters who revert aging
24 挹其芳流。 fetch water from its fragrant watercourses.
- 25 子能得之， If you can find it,
26 真人可儔， you are a companion of the realized ones;
27 不知此道， without knowing this Way,
28 萬為土灰。 the ten thousand things are dust and ashes.
- 29 口耳之經， The Scripture transmitted through mouth and ear
30 名為天樓。 is called “Tower of Heaven.”

92 For *fu* 伏, I read *xiu* 休, following the *Baopu zi* and the *Shangqing daobao jing*.

93 For *zhen* 真, I read *qi* 其, again following the *Baopu zi* and the *Shangqing daobao jing*.

(2) Inner Band

1 太上人鳥之形， 2 山之右流， 3 玉女所登， 4 窈窕巍巍。 5 紫雲飄飄， 6 甘露霏霏。 7 金池玉房， 8 在乎其隈。 9 無枝之草， 10 冬夏不衰。 11 玄液反生， 12 上下華蕤。 13 愚兆競往， 14 至皆死歸。 15 惟有太上， 16 能登不頽。 17 漱挹流精， 18 以致天飛。 19 金光圓生， 20 真炁乘雷。 21 夫子瞑目， 22 長在八威。 23 石生神獸， 24 元始其音難追。 25 一炁所成， 26 土山不摧。 27 書名天漢， 28 口傳無陂。 29 是謂玄輝， 30 仙也。

Variants

1 長谷之山 Bpz; om. Dbj || 2 om. Bpz; 與之左流 Dbj || 3 om. Bpz ||
 4 窈窕：杳杳 Bpz; 與之左流 Dbj || 5 紫雲：玄氣 Bpz || 6 甘露：玉液 Bpz ||
 7 玉：紫 Bpz; 池：地 Dbj || 8 隈：中 Dbj || 9-12 om. Bpz Dbj ||
 13 愚人妄往 Bpz Dbj || 14 om. Dbj || 15 有道之士 Bpz; om. Dbj ||
 16 登之不衰 Bpz; om. Dbj || 17 採服黃精; om. Dbj || 18 om. Dbj ||
 19-30 om. Bpz Dbj

Translation

1	太上人鳥之形，	The form of the most high Man-Bird –
2	山之右流，	the right side of the mountain
3	玉女所登，	is where the jade women climb,
4	窈窕巍巍。	gracefully ascending to the summit.
5	紫雲飄飄，	Purple clouds levitate and float,
6	甘露霏霏。	Sweet Dew falls abundant;
7	金池玉房，	golden ponds and jade chambers
8	在乎其隈。	are found at every corner.
9	無枝之草，	Its branchless herbs
10	冬夏不衰。	never wither, whether in summer or in winter;
11	玄液反生，	their mysterious sap reverts one to life,
12	上下華蕤。	above and below, flowers are luxuriant.
13	愚兆競往，	The foolish ones rush to go there,
14	至皆死歸。	but once they arrive, they all die;
15	惟有太上，	only the highest ones
16	能登不頽。	can climb it without crumbling.
17	漱挹流精，	Rinsing their mouths with ladles of its flowing essence,
18	以致天飛。	they are able to fly to Heaven;

- 19 金光圓生， surrounded by a golden radiance,
 20 真炁乘雷。 with their True Breath they ride on thunders.
- 21 夫子瞑目， Close your eyes
 22 長在八威。 and dwell for long on the Eight Daunters;
 23 石生神獸， stones give birth to divine animals –
 24 元始其音難追。 primordial, their sounds are difficult to trace.⁹⁴
- 25 一炁所成， Formed by the One Breath,
 26 土山不摧。 the earth-mountain never collapses.
 27 書名天漢， The name of the book is “Heavenly River,”
 28 口傳無陂。 it is transmitted forever by word of mouth.
- 29 是謂玄輝， This is what is called mysterious brilliance –
 30 仙也。 the immortal.

Baopu zi neipian 抱朴子內篇 (6.128)

This passage corresponds to lines 1–18 and 23–26 of the Outer Band, and lines 1–8 (except 2–3) and 13–18 of the Inner Band.

夫太元之山，難知易求，不天不地，不沈不浮，絕險綿邈，嶧嵬崎嶇，和氣網緼，神意並游，玉井泓邃，灌溉匪休，百二十官，曹府相由，離坎列位，玄芝萬株，絳樹特生，其寶皆殊，金玉嵯峨，醴泉出隅，還年之士，挹其清流，子能修之，喬松可儔。此一山也。長谷之山，杳杳巍巍，玄氣飄飄，玉液霏霏，金池紫房，在乎其隈，愚人妄往，至皆死歸，有道之士，登之不衰，採服黃精，以致天飛。此二山也。

The mountain of the Great Origin is difficult to know but easy to seek. It is neither in heaven nor on earth, neither under the waters nor above the waters. Ravines and precipices are unending, peaks are imposing, paths are rugged; in the harmonious breath, warm and enshrouding, this

94 Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual*, 165, suggests that two characters are missing in the received text, but the rhymes suggest that is not the case. Huang, *Picturing the True Form*, 149, places *yuanshi* 元始 at end of the previous line, but this would break both the line and the rhyme patterns of the poem. There is almost certainly a textual issue in this sentence, but it seems impossible to solve it.

is where the divine realized ones roam.⁹⁵ Jade wells, clear and deep, irrigate without pause; one hundred and twenty officers follow one another in their agencies and courts. There are Li ☳ and Kan ☵ arranged next to each other, and ten thousand mysterious *zhi*-plants; a crimson tree grows alone, and all of its fruits are pearls.⁹⁶ All through sharp peaks of gold and jade, springs of nectar flow at every corner. The masters who revert aging fetch water from its clear watercourses. If you can cultivate this, you are a companion of Wang Qiao and Chisong zi. This is the first mountain.

The Mountain of the Long Valley is dim and lofty. Mysterious Breath levitates and floats, Golden Liquor falls abundant; golden ponds and jade chambers are found at every corner. The foolish ones recklessly go there, but once they arrive, they all die. Only those who have the Dao climb it and do not perish. Collecting and ingesting the yellow essence, they are able to fly in Heaven. This is the second mountain.

Shangqing daobao jing 上清道寶經 (DZ 1353, 2.13a–b)

This passage corresponds to lines 1–18 (except 2 and 5–6) of the Outer Band, and lines 2–8 (except 4) of the Inner Band.

太上人鳥山，不天不地，不沈不浮，元氣火煙，神真是遊。玉井泓澄，灌溉靡休，百二十官，天府相通。日月昏明，玄芝萬株，絳樹特生，其實皆珠，白玉嵯峨，醴泉出隅，與之左流，玉女所登，紫雲飄飄，甘露霏霏。金地玉房，在乎其中。

The most high Man-Bird Mountain is neither in heaven nor on earth, neither under the waters nor above the waters. In the Original Breath, flames and smoke: this is where the divine realized ones roam. Jade wells, clear and limpid, irrigate without pause; one hundred and twenty officers follow one another in the celestial courts. There are the Sun and the Moon that make dusk and light, and ten thousand mysterious *zhi*-plants; a crimson tree grows alone, all of its fruits are pearls. All through sharp peaks of white jade, springs of nectar flow at every corner. On its right side the jade women climb. Purple clouds levitate and float, Sweet Dew falls abundant; golden land and jade chambers are found at every corner.

95 For *yi* 意, I read *zhen* 真, following the *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu* and the *Shangqing daobao jing*.

96 For *bao* 寶, I read *shi* 實, again following the *Xuanlan renniao shan jingtu* and the *Shangqing daobao jing*.

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