

Paratextuality, Materiality, and Corporeality in Medieval Chinese Religions

Talismans (fu) and Diagrams (tu)

ABSTRACT In medieval China, talismans (*fu*) and sacred diagrams (*tu*) were ubiquitous elements in religious texts. Since they were composed of divine illegible esoteric patterns, meaning was not produced by the markings talismans and diagrams bore; it was, rather, displaced onto the objects themselves, whether they were two-dimensionally represented in scriptures and ritual manuals or externalized and materialized onto physical supports. In this respect, the objecthood and palpable materiality of talismans and diagrams made them shorthand tokens for direct access to the supernatural. Drawing on emblematic yet understudied scriptures of medieval Daoism and esoteric Buddhist, the present study considers talismans and diagrams as paratextual objects, bringing to light the fact that they not only passively frame the reading of a text but in many instances also constitute the primary and determining level of “text” that is read. In this way, sources in which talismans and diagrams featured prominently were approached first and foremost through their material aspects, namely paratexts. What is more, the talismans and diagrams that appeared in texts were often meant to be externalized and materialized, in some cases onto the bodies of adepts or visualized in their mind’s eye, thereby conflating paratextuality, materiality, and corporeality. In a pair of striking examples, practitioners are instructed to embody and become actual ritual objects, blurring the boundaries between text, object, and body in one single divine locus. **KEYWORDS** Daoism, Buddhism, Paratexts, Materiality, Corporeality, Embodiment, China, Talismans, Diagrams, Authority

INTRODUCTION

In the context of medieval China, revealed talismans (*fu* 符) and diagrams (*tu* 圖) are synonymous with Daoism. One has only to peruse the pages of the Daoist Canon (*daozang* 道藏) for a hint of the tradition’s reliance on the implements. Both of these ritual media operated on the basis of true form (*zhenxing* 真形) and the parent notion of true name (*zhenming* 真名). Essentially, talismans and diagrams were depictions of a supramundane entity’s true name and true shape respectively, interchangeable and complementary symbols that gave a visually observable shape to a supramundane being’s “image” (*xiang* 象)—its metaphysical substance and most fundamental identity. Although true name and true shape remained indexical, they were nonetheless closer approximations of the way in which an entity would be constituted in its unmediated state as an image (*xiang*) of the all-generating Dao than the habitual and inaccurately anthropomorphic representations that circulated in the world of mortals.¹ The concept of the “imaginal” that Henry Corbin deployed in his

1. I have presented notions concerning true name in relation to talismanic script as well as talismans in relation to diagrams in my previous work; accordingly, I will only keep to the broad strokes here. For those who are interested in a detailed discussion supported by primary sources, see my *The Writ of the Three Sovereigns: From Local Lore to*



FIG. 1. True names in talismanic script from the *Scripture of the Wondrous Essence of the Eight Emperors* (*Dongshen badi miaojing jing* 洞神八帝妙精經; DZ 640), 18a–20b.

analysis of Islamic theology can perhaps serve as an explicative parallel for readers more familiar with Abrahamic traditions. It refers to the creative and imaginative space which renders the metasensory world of the divine perceptible or, at least, decodable in the mundane world.² In their respective traditions, true form (as well as true name) and the imaginal are notional topographies that mediate between the unfathomably ethereal realm of the divine and everyday sensory granularity.

The two images above and below are salient examples of talismans and diagrams from the earliest surviving complete reprint of the Daoist Canon, dated to 1598. Although they are from the Late Imperial period, we may assume on the basis of earlier visual cognates that they remained sensibly similar to the ones used in medieval China or even earlier. The first image (fig. 1) is a sample page from a source that will be discussed in the following section. It contains 24 true names (*zhenming*) of deities and spirits rendered

Institutional Daoism (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), especially 50–62 and 94–101, respectively; see also n. 24, below.

2. See Henry Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis: The Imaginary and the Imaginal,” *Spring* (1972): 1–19.

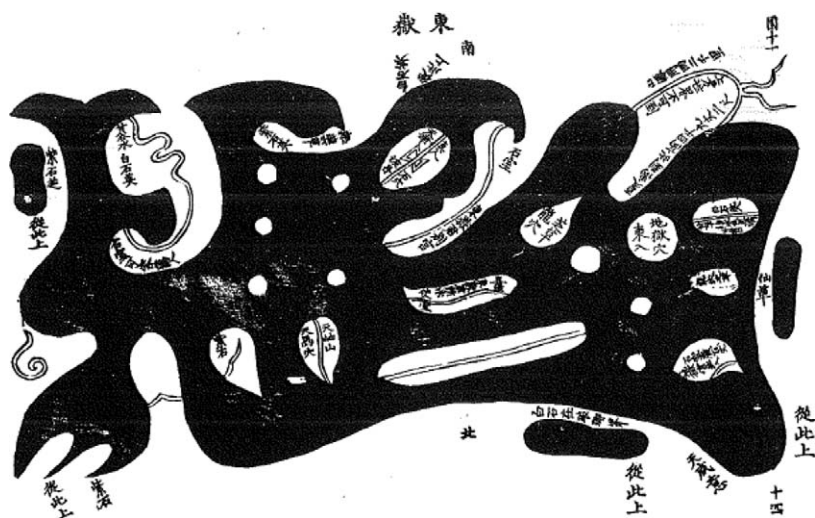


FIG. 2. The “true form” of Mount Tai from the *Ancient Original True Form Diagrams of the Five Peaks* (*Wuyue guben zhenxing tu* 五嶽古本真形圖; DZ 44), 18.17b-18a. 1598.

in celestial script (*tianwen* 天文), a form of divine talismanic script. The names were to be inscribed onto a support medium in accordance with the adjacent instructions provided in conventional script. Once reproduced and ritually activated, they were employed to control the entities with which they are associated. The second figure (fig. 2) is a true form diagram (*zhenxing tu* 真形圖) of Mount Tai 泰山, one of the five cosmic sacred peaks of Daoism. Such diagrams were used as numinous maps to guide adepts into the marchmounts’ invisible recesses, where they could unearth divine medicines of immortality or consort with sylphs and immortals. They could also function as meditation aids; and since true form and true name are two sides of the same coin, diagrams, in the same capacity as talismans, could serve as apotropaic amulets or summoning devices for deities who populated the cosmic mountains.

Although they are most commonly associated with Daoism, which took formal shape in the early third century CE, talismans and diagrams have a long pre-Daoist history in China. Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) conceptions of imperial authority rested on the ability to communicate with the divine through sacred script and symbols, as evidenced by excavated materials pertaining to turtle plastron and scapula divination.³ Donald Harper argues that the transition to imperial China (220 BCE onward) was accompanied by a new epistemological framework in which “diagrams [*tu* 圖] functioned together with the written word [*wen* 文; *shu* 書] to reveal a universal plan—at once cosmic and divine.” Humans inhabited “an encoded world that sages decoded and made accessible to society in material form,” namely as *fu* [符] and

3. Mark Lewis has notably established a formal genealogical link between the script that permeates talismans and diagrams and Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) oracle-bone writing; see the first chapter of Mark Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

tu [圖], talismans and diagrams.⁴ The earliest surviving examples of these implements were designed for this very purpose, namely, to render encrypted cosmico-divine universal knowledge into an intelligible and digestible format.⁵ As Harper concludes, their “classification in an epistemological system [...] reinforced the idea of a universe that was knowable, communicable, and applicable to human affairs.”⁶ If the myriad creatures were composed of perishable forms (*xing*), transient and unstable by definition, talismans and diagrams offered their “true forms” (*zhenxing*), a more stable peek into the immutable essence of things, their “image”—(*xiang*) as it was referred to, which was itself a direct window into the eternal Dao, the “Great Image without form” (*daxiang wuxing* 大象無形).⁷

In the imperial administration, tallies (*qi* 契; *quan* 券) were used as gages to verify the ruler’s written orders, or as tokens of authority. Authentication was confirmed when the two split halves of the tally were joined together. Combining a juridico-administrative logic with the notion of a divine script and true-form images, revealed talismans and diagrams became ubiquitous tokens of divine approbation confirming a ruler’s receipt of the mandate to rule by the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).⁸ Possession of these omens was proof of two things: first, that the ruler was contractually bound to do the bidding of Heaven; and second, that the ruler could contractually bind deities—from high-ranking officials of the celestial bureaucracy or local spirits—to do his bidding. Because they shared with imperial cults the view of the supernatural as a vast hierarchically-structured bureaucracy (which served as the blueprint for the state rather than the other way around), Daoists were instrumental in developing ritual technologies related to talismans and diagrams.⁹ However, other actors in the religious landscape of medieval China, most notably Buddhists, also made ample use of them.

4. Donald Harper, “Communication by Design: Two Silk Manuscripts of Diagrams (*Tu*) from Mawangdui Tomb Three,” in *The Warp and the Weft: Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China*, ed. Francesca Bray, Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, and Georges Métaillé (Leiden: Brill, 2007): 169–190.

5. Paraphrasing the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn [Annals]), Donald Harper describes the Mawangdui manuscript *Tianwen tu* (Diagram of Heaven’s Patterns) in these terms; see his “The Magico-Religious Conception of Tu ‘Diagram’ in Early Chinese Thought,” (Unpublished Typescript, 1998), 6–9.

6. Harper, “The Magico-Religious Conception of Tu ‘Diagram,’” 12.

7. *Daode jing* 41. The *Xici* 繫辭 (Appended Statements) explains: “What is above form is called the Dao; what is below the form is called an object” 形而上者為之道，形而下者為之器; translation from Fabrizio Pregadio, “The Notion of ‘Form’ and the Ways of Liberation in Daoism,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 14 (2004), 95; see also Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 323. Pregadio (“The Notion of Form”), 90–99 explains that the term *qi* 器, “literally meaning ‘vessel,’ and is used in this sentence as a synonym of *wu* [物], ‘thing’; it denotes any entity that exists in the world of form, distinguished from the Dao, which is above form.”

8. Talismans (*fu*) and diagrams (*tu*) revealed by Heaven in pairs as tangible proof of the Heavenly Mandate (*tianming* 天命) played an important role in imperial consecration rites since the Zhou. Until the Tang dynasty (618–907), the Chinese terms for talismans and diagrams, *fu* and *tu*, were interchangeable—the only distinction was that talismans were considered “male,” and diagrams, “female”—a contrast which implied that they were often revealed and transmitted as gendered pairs. Around the sixth or seventh century, talismans came to be regarded as a comparatively textualized set of symbols while diagrams were considered more image-based.

9. For a detailed analysis of Daoist talismans that firmly underscores their juridico-administrative dimensions, see Stephen Bumbacher, *Empowered Writing, Exorcistic and Apotropaic Rituals in Medieval China* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2012). For an exhaustive overview of the genre of Daoist diagrams and their grounding in true form, see Shih-shan Susan Huang, *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Buddhism originated in India in the sixth century BCE and was present in China from the first century CE at the latest. In order to gain a foothold in the Middle Kingdom, as elsewhere, Buddhists made concerted efforts to adapt their teachings or practices and render them intelligible to host cultures. Thus, the question of why the Chinese agents of translocal Buddhism adopted such unequivocally indigenous religious forms as talismans and diagrams can be answered rather succinctly: first and foremost, they conferred politico-spiritual (theocratic or cosmocratic) authority and legitimacy; second, the symbolic language in which they were couched was immediately comprehensible and familiar to Chinese audiences—and especially ruling elites—a boon for Buddhism, which was periodically vilified as an invasive foreign tradition.¹⁰ More important is the question of how this adoption occurred and, as a corollary, that of how it was so seamlessly executed—particularly in contrast to the interchange of doctrinal notions or ritual frameworks, which required delicate reformulation and careful recalibrating. In attempting to shed light on the processes through which talismans or diagrams and their semantic capital were transferred from a local non-Buddhist context to a translocal Buddhist one, it is my hope that certain insights might be gained in understanding the mechanics of Buddhist interactions with indigenous traditions in China and beyond.

This study opens with a consideration of talismans and diagrams as fundamentally illegible artefacts. Drawing on the example of the Daoist *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* (*Sanhuang wen* 三皇文), the first section centers on their role as material objects, even when they consist of two-dimensional representations in a scriptural source. In this regard, they are paratextual objects, yet, as the second section demonstrates, this does not detract from their importance. In fact, in spite of their status as offtext, they were decisive in framing how the text was read. The third section follows this thread, focusing on a Buddhist source, *Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Five Sciences* (*Longshu wuming lun* 龍樹五明論), and the deployment ritual objects produced from two-dimensional representations of talismans and diagrams contained in its pages. Building on this analysis, the subsequent section of the article concentrates on another Buddhist document, the *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva Which Pervades the Dharma Realm, Benefits Sentient Beings, and Perfumes Thusness* (*Guanzizai pusa da beizhi yin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongsheng shun zhenru fa* 觀自在菩薩大悲智印周遍法界利益衆生薰眞如法). It establishes how paratexts not only activate their semantic potential in texts or the ritual arena, but also on/in the body of adepts. As a result, in certain cases, practitioners of medieval Chinese religions embody the artefact and supply the point of intersection between paratextuality, materiality, and corporeality. Lastly, the article closes with a discussion of the methodological implications for the study of East Asian religions.

10. For a sample of Buddhist responses to anti-foreign sentiments as well as Chinese counter-responses, see Gil Raz, "Conversion of the Barbarians (*huabu* 化胡): Discourse as Proto Han Nationalism" in "The Literary Subversive," ed. Dominic Steavu, *Medieval History Journal* 17.2 (2014): 255–294.

1. ON THE ILLEGIBILITY AND MATERIALITY OF TALISMANS AND DIAGRAMS

It should be underlined that prior to proverbially joining the competition and integrating talismans or cosmic diagrams into their tradition, Buddhists had attempted to discredit them. Polemicists such as Dao'an 道安 (fl. 6th century) and Zhen Luan 甄鸞 (fl. 535–581) were vocal detractors of Daoism: their efforts initially converged on the late third-century *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* (*Sanhuang wen*), a collection of talismans representing the true names of gods and spirits rendered in undecipherable divine talismanic script (fig. 1). The talismans were used to summon gods or keep baleful spirits at bay.

In his *Treatise on the Two Teachings* (*Erjiao lun* 二教論), Dao'an plainly states that the earliest figure in the transmission line of the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, Bao Jing 鮑靜 (230 or 260–330), fabricated the text that he claimed to have discovered in a cave on a famous mountain. The passage explains: “during the Yuan Kang reign of the [Western] Jin [between 291 and 299], Bao Jing forged the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* and consequently incurred capital punishment.”¹¹ The notion that Bao Jing was executed for forgery is echoed in Zhen Luan's *Essays to Ridicule the Dao* (*Xiaodao lun* 笑道論). The text reports that “Bao Jing forged the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns*; the matter was exposed, and he was put to death.”¹²

One of the important reasons why Dao'an and Zhen Luan singled out the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* was because of its considerable cultural impact. The source was a keystone of Daoist talismanic methods in early medieval China. Despite, or rather precisely because of the straightforwardness of its methods, during the fifth century, the source came to constitute the core of the Cavern of Divinity (*dongshen* 洞神), one of the three foundational corpora and textual pillars of the nascent Daoist Canon. Already by the fourth century, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) praises the collection of talismans in *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱朴子):

[...] Among important writings on the Way, none surpass the *Esoteric Writ of the Three Sovereigns* and the *True Form Charts of the Five Peaks*. The ancients, the immortal officers, and accomplished people respect and keep secret these teachings.¹³

道書之重者，莫過於三皇內文五岳真形圖也。古人仙官至人，尊祕此道。

Although the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* and the *True Form Charts of the Five Peaks* topped the rankings of Daoist texts from the 3rd to the 5th centuries, they were illegible. Like all talismans and revealed diagrams, they were “writings,” yet they were authored in a divine language undecipherable to the common mortal. Their markings consisted of the true names (*zhenming*) for talismans and true form (*zhenxing*) for diagrams—ontologically one and the same since they were both equated with the original unmediated appearance and identity of supranatural entities. Only immortals or those of equivalently high spiritual

11. 晉元康中。鮑靖造三皇經被誅。事在晉史; *Erjiao lun* 二教論 (Treatise on the two teachings; 569) in *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集 (Expanded collection for the spread of the light; T.2103), 8.141b.

12. 鮑靜造三皇。事露而被誅; *Xiaodao lun* 笑道論 (Essays to ridicule the Dao) in *Guang hongming ji*, 9.151b.

13. *Baopuzi*, 19.336.

attainment could decode the sacred characters and images that constituted talismans and diagrams. Although, with luck, one could encounter such figures in antiquity, Ge Hong laments that by his time, in the fourth century, no one was accomplished enough to read divine markings:

Formerly, during the Kingdom of Wu (222–280) lived a Jie Xiang who could read talismanic script and tell whether it was corrupt or not. Once someone attempted to test him by removing the captions from various therapeutic and apotropaic talismans, but Jie Xiang identified them one by one and he even corrected some errors. Since then, none has known talismanic script. Nowadays, people cannot read the characters on talismans, and no one can tell if they are wrong.¹⁴

昔吳世有介象者，能讀符文，知誤之與否。有人試取治百病雜符及諸厭劾符，去其籤題以示象，皆一一據名之。其有誤者，便為人定之。自是以來，莫有能知者也。[...] 然今符上字不可讀，誤不可覺 [...].

As the artefacts still circulated in Ge Hong's time, we may deduce that the user's capacity to decipher a talisman or diagram was by no means a prerequisite for its successful application. As long as the inscriptions or shapes were correctly traced, it mattered little if adepts were illiterate. In actuality, the illegibility of the ritual objects added to their authority for it was proof of their supernatural provenance, and by extension, of their divine authority.

Other scholars have pointed to the centrality of illegibility in establishing the authority of talismans and their perceived efficacy. James Robson and Gil Raz have argued that incomprehensibility is a defining feature of most talismanic script.¹⁵ Likewise, Yang Zhaohua signals the cryptic nature of divine writing, but he also points out that some of the earliest talismans were “simple and legible.”¹⁶ Only with the development and spread of institutional Daoism from the second or third centuries CE is there a pronounced appreciation for talismans written in illegible script. The contemporary scholar Ge Zhaoguang has aptly termed the Daoist penchant for unreadable writing a “linguistic archaism” (*fugu zhuyi* 復古主義) intentionally designed to simultaneously drape the talismans in a veil of unfathomable otherworldliness while concentrating the means of their production in the hands of a small and qualified clerical minority.¹⁷

14. *Baopuzi*, *ibid.* cf. *Baopuzi*, 19,335–36.

15. James Robson, “Signs of Power: Talismanic Writing in Chinese Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 48:2 (2008), especially 135–139, and 167; and Gil Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism: Creation of Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2012), 139–143.

16. Yang Zhaohua, “Devouring Impurities: Myth, Ritual and Talisman in the Cult of Ucchuşma in Tang China” (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2013), 267–268.

17. Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, *Zhongguo zongjiao yu wenxue lunji* 中國宗教與文學論集, 57, cited in Yang, “Devouring Impurities,” 269. Similarly, Brigitte Baptandier, “Le Tableau talismanique de l'Empereur de Jade, Construction d'un objet d'écriture,” *L'Homme* 129 (1994): 59–92, argues that while talismanic diagrams are not intended to be read according to habitual linguistic conventions, through their symbols and script, they narrate mythologies and histories (among other things) and are therefore decipherable if not legible. However, she focuses on contemporary applications of talismans-diagrams that date from a more recent time when Daoism, especially in its more vernacular incarnations, was less concerned with establishing legitimacy and thus not as inclined to emphasize illegibility; see also Yang, “Devouring Impurities,” 269.

With the institutionalization of Daoism and the codification of its writings during the fifth and sixth centuries, the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* became one of the fundamental ordination documents for clergy.¹⁸ This document was among the first that novices received during initiation because its divine characters spelled out the names of all the deities and demons to which the recruit now had access. The *Writ* was inscribed in the earlier Han-dynasty tradition of imperial sacraments, celestially-granted tokens confirming a divinely-sanctioned mandate to rule. The discovery or possession of these sacred gages was evidence of a monarch's privileged line of communication with Heaven, of their control of supernatural powers, and consequently, of their authority over human subjects as well. Similarly, receiving the *Writ* implied direct access to and dominion over the gods whose divine names appeared in the talismans.

Cognizant of the close association between revealed talismans or diagrams and imperial legitimacy, Buddhists persisted in their efforts to discredit the *Writ*. Under the aegis of a sympathetic emperor Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (599–649; r. 626–649), they spearheaded a campaign to revoke the canonical status of the Daoist scripture. The *Forest of Pearls in the Garden of the Law* (*Fayuan zhulin*), a late 7th-century Buddhist encyclopedia, relates the following events:

In the twenty second year of the Zhenguang era of the Tang (648), there was [...] a Madam Wang who possessed the *True Form Diagrams of the Five Peaks* and the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns*, which had been forged by the Daoist master of yore, Bao Jing [...]. She praised it, saying: 'Invariably, when nobles have this scripture, they become monarchs of kingdoms [...] and ladies who possess this text will inevitably become empresses [...].'¹⁹

至大唐貞觀二十二年。有[...]妻王氏有五岳真[形]圖及舊道士鮑靜所造三皇經[...]。上云。凡諸侯有此文者。必為國王[...]。婦人有此文者。必為皇后。

The seditious potential of this account did not go unnoticed by government censors, who, after a summary investigation, arrived at the conclusion that the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* was a human fabrication and decidedly not a sacred text revealed by gods. In the fifth month of the very same year, an edict from the Vice Director (*shilang* 侍郎) Cui Renshi 崔仁師 decreed:

The script and characters of the *Scripture of the Three Sovereigns* cannot be transmitted; its words are reckless perversions, hence it is fitting that it be destroyed.²⁰

三皇經文字既不可傳。又語涉妖妄宜並除之。

18. See Steavu, *The Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, 180–185.

19. *Fayuan zhulin* (法院珠林; T.2122), 55.708ab; a substantial paraphrase of the passage is found in Timothy Barrett, *Taoism under the T'ang. Religion and Empire during the Golden Age of Chinese History* (London: Wellsweep, 1996), 23–25.

20. *Fayuan zhulin*, 55.708b.

A few months later, after the regional magistrate-investigators had assembled all the copies of *Writ* they could collect, the lot was publicly burned before the Imperial Secretariat of the Board of Rites and the text was stricken from the Daoist Canon.²¹

The principal reason why Buddhist polemicists such as Dao'an and Zhen Luan were so zealous in their accusations, and why the Tang authorities so swift in their condemnation, was the intimate connection between political authority and divinely-revealed imperial sacraments. Talismans such as the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, which functioned as rosters of supernatural beings, constitute a prime example of this close relationship. For fear that they might be used in counter-claims of legitimacy to the throne, the medieval Chinese state imposed strict controls on these documents. The Tang Code of 653 CE, for example, stipulated that any household found in possession of the *Luo River Writing* (*Luoshu* 洛書) or the *Yellow River Chart* (*Hetu* 河圖), another pair of illustrious sacraments, would see its members sentenced to two years of forced labour.²² Anna Seidel has demonstrated that talismans and diagrams were above all celestial tokens that testified to a privileged relation between their holder and the divine, and that they were deployed in full awareness of their political potential, nourished by the absence of any demarcation between temporal and spiritual authority in early and medieval China.²³ Registers (*lu* 籙), diagrams including the *True Form Charts of the Five Peaks*, and most pertinently the talismans of the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, were transmitted in Daoist consecration rituals that were tantamount to an imperial investiture, whereby the adept, now a spiritual sovereign, was granted dominion over the sacred spaces or supramundane denizens represented in the objects.²⁴

21. *Fayuan zbulin*, *ibid*.

22. Alexei Volkov, "Geometrical Diagrams in Traditional Chinese Mathematics," cited from Francesca Bray, "Introduction," in Bray et al., ed., *The Warp and the Weft*, 23.

23. See Anna Seidel, "Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments: Taoist Roots in the Apocrypha," in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of Rolf Stein*, ed. Michel Strickmann (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1983), 2.291–371.

24. The tradition that evolved around the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* shares many traits with that of Daoist registers (*lu* 籙), perhaps best represented by the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao 天師道). Despite the similarities, there are nonetheless significant points that set them apart. For example, the *Writ* is deeply couched in a centrifugal imperial metaphor and most of the deities over which it affords control are local (tied to features such as woods, rivers, mountains, roads, or stars). Here we may discern the imprint of Han theocratic ideology, most vividly manifested during Emperor Wudi's 漢武帝 (156–87 BCE) reign (141–87 BCE); by periodically touring commanderies and sacrificing to local gods, the emperor appropriated their cults along with their territory of influence. Returning to the capital with his "acquisitions," he posited himself as a centralized distillation of all regional gods, consequently expanding his politico-spiritual authority to the farthest reaches of his empire. Conversely, the Celestial Master registers chiefly contain the names of martial deities, valued first and foremost for their exorcistic or apotropaic powers. Moreover, they are typically composed in legible "human" characters whereas the divine celestial script of the *Writ* is illegible. As a corollary, a rhetoric of authenticity and legitimacy developed around the talismans of the *Writ*: they are often referred to as *zhenfu* 真符 (true talismans), *zhenzi* 真字 (true characters), *zhenben* 真本 (true text), *zhenming* 真名 (true names), or *zhenhui* 真諱 (true concealed names) much in line with the parent notion of "true form" *zhenxing* 真形. According to this logic, since they are written directly in a divine language without the intermediary of human understanding, they are ineluctably "truer" than any of their counterparts rendered in more legible adulterated scripts.

2. TALISMANS AND DIAGRAMS AS PARATEXTUAL OBJECTS

To reiterate, the fetishization of illegibility as a discourse is principally identified with formalized or institutional Daoism in China; it is woven into the early medieval rhetoric of divine revelations according to which scriptures were said to have manifested in one of the Daoist heavens in illegible divine script before degrading into versions that were compatible with base human forms of communication. In this light, the illegible true names (*zhenming*) or true forms (*zhenxing*) of deities contained in talismans and diagrams are remnants of the original divine form of a sacred scripture. Because of their unintelligibility, they constitute immediately verifiable and tangible evidence of a text's divine origin and legitimacy.

A number of attempts have been made, some more successful than others, at uncovering the syntactic logic of talismans according to their constituent components, a large proportion of which are derived from Chinese graphs or from stylized likenesses of asterisms or astral bodies.²⁵ Although in some cases one may tease out the illusion of meaning, the language of talismans and diagrams is designed to be hermetic, remaining somehow familiar but ultimately impenetrable to all but a small spiritual elite. That late medieval and early modern versions of the ritual implements contained more legible components is a testament to their increasing imbrication with vernacular or "popular" Daoist traditions in which illegibility and pristine celestial origins were less of a concern.²⁶ However, even in such instances, they were not meant to be read since any incidental meaning that could be derived from the markings on talismans and diagrams was subordinate to the meaning they embodied as objects.

Because they were essentially illegible, talismans and diagrams operated first and foremost according to a logic of materiality. Talismanic script and true form images were typically written, carved, or stamped onto material supports such as paper, silk, wood, stone, leather, or even skin. More rarely, they were traced on soil, in water, or in air. Sometimes, the support was incinerated and its ashes ingested; other times, the inscriptions survived more indefinitely as apotropaic amulets worn on one's person or as sacred gages establishing authenticity or trust. In all cases, talismanic script and true form images semantically empowered those media on which they were affixed, even the most ephemeral ones. Yet, since the collection of logographic or iconographic symbols that usually bear semantic value are undecipherable, the burden of carrying meaning is displaced to the physical medium itself. To put it another way, because the markings on talismans and

25. The most convincing attempts, it should be noted, focus on talismans from either vernacular, or post-medieval and vernacular-inflected Daoist reform movements such as the Tianxin zhengfa 天心正法 (Orthodox Rites of the Celestial Heart). See, for instance, Monica Drexler, *Daoistische Schriftmagie: Interpretationen zu den Schriftamuletten Fu im Daozang* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994). For a synopsis of secondary sources, see Yang Zhaohua, "Devouring Impurities," 271–275; see also his deciphering of an Ucchuşma talisman, 288–290.

26. To be sure, a proportion of talismans from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) present decipherable marks and graphs. But these are once more derived from vernacular traditions and/or common religion. See Wang Yucheng 王育成 on the subject, "Donghan daofu shi li" 東漢道符釋例, *Kaogu xuebao* 考古學報1 (1991): 45–56. Many of the graphs denote concepts that are different from those with which they are associated in conventional language. For example, the character for "sun" or "day," *ri* 日, a common component of talismanic script, can refer the heraldic beasts of the Five Agents (*wuxing* 五行); see Drexler, *Daoistische Schriftmagie*, 50.

diagrams are semantically empty, they acquire meaning through their objecthood, whether it is wooden seal or the pages of a scripture: they are active signifiers whose semantic value rests in the very absence of a signified. Rather than acting as vectors of meaning, talismanic script or true forms, and by extension, the talismans and the diagrams which they grace, are physical concretions of meaning—objects whose semantic potential is embedded in their very constitution as objects.²⁷

Although they commonly appear as stand-alone documents, talismans and diagrams were more habitually integrated into scriptures, where conventional text was by far the dominant vehicle for conveying meaning. Consequently, in textual analyses, talismans and diagrams are usually considered accessory devices that merely supplement or enhance the main text. They are in fact paratexts, objects that frame or influence the reading of a text but are external to the text itself. This includes prefaces, epigraphs, tables of contents, but also type font, the name of the author, the shape or format of a source, the kind and quality of the support medium, and so on. As Gérard Genette has shown, paratexts play a more complex role than simply buttressing text. They are strategic liminal spaces between text and off-text where the reading of the text is largely determined. They are thresholds that invite or exclude specific interpretations and guide the relationship between reader and text.²⁸

Paratexts exist within the physical boundaries of a source—but they can also exist outside of it. The first variety is designated as *peritext*: talismanic script and true-form diagrams fall under this rubric as they are contained within the pages of sources, adjacent to text. The second variety, which encompasses the paratexts that are outside the physical boundaries of a source, denotes *epitexts*. Talismans and diagrams can also fall in this class since their illustrations from within the text are meant as blueprints or patterns for the reader to reproduce outside the text, when carrying out a ritual or deploying their apotropaic benefits *in situ*.

Elena Valussi has already shown the benefits of considering paratexts in the context of Chinese religions and, more particularly, Female Alchemy (*nüdan* 女丹).²⁹ The perspective gained from approaching talismans and diagrams specifically as paratexts is one that brings to light certain features that are crucial in explaining the sustained relationship between these objects and claims of access to a higher divine order of authority as well as the universal intelligibility of these claims. One of these features, tied to their function as peritextual devices, is their plasticity and adaptability to various discursive fields. A second feature, tied to their epitextual function, is their materiality, the fact that they are concrete objects—either as a component of a material text or transferred from the pages of a text and reproduced onto an external material support—with established and immediately recognizable symbolic capital. A priori, these two

27. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 30–32, for a discussion of similar notions with respect to symbols in the constitution of religious systems.

28. See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

29. Elena Valussi, “Female Alchemy and Paratext: How to Read *nüdan* in a Historical Context,” *Asia Major* 21:2 (2008): 153–193.

facets may seem at odds—one tends toward compatibility with multiple semantic orders, the other toward rigid adherence to a pre-defined meaning. But in actuality, these two features complement each other and make talismans and diagrams virtually unavoidable in the formulation of religious identity in imperial China, whether Daoist, Buddhist, or other.

On one hand, talismans and diagrams are virtual clean-slate receptacles for, and simultaneously, vectors of first-order meaning. Because of their illegibility and the resulting plasticity of their content, they are adaptable to any ritual context. Their markings can refer to the Daoist god of a local river just as well as a Buddhist Wisdom King (Skt. *vidyārāja*; Ch. *ming wang* 明王); diagrams can represent the interior space of a Daoist sacred mountain just as well as the structure of the Buddhist Diamond realm (Skt. *vajradhātu*; Ch. *jin'gangjie* 金剛界). On the other hand, talismans and diagrams do come with some permanent second-order semantic baggage that is independent from the variable meaning they embody. They espouse a relatively consistent juridico-administrative form which is immediately recognizable through stable and distinctive material features including square or rectangular frames, undecipherable and thus supernatural flowing scripts or shaded ink-stain images, recurring geometric patterns (which often represent cosmological principles), and so on. It is these instantly verifiable material elements that mechanically evoke legitimacy, credentials, or supramundane authority.

Thus, despite the apparent semantic subordination of talismans and diagrams to text in Buddhist and Daoist materials (by virtue of their ostensible lack of content and their presumably ancillary position with respect to writing in the layout of scriptures), these paratexts, when they appear, are in fact dominant in framing the reading of a source. They invert the relationship between text and offtext, bringing the traditionally marginalized elements of a source to the forefront in determining how that source is read. Indeed, talismans and diagrams become the text that is to be “read” first and foremost, since they are what provides the scripture with its divine or spiritual heft. Although this reading is effectively undertaken via the accompanying instructions or commentary, the central focus of texts with talismans and diagrams remains squarely on those paratexts. From the moment a source is unrolled or opened, the eyes bypass the text and are immediately attracted to the distinctive curves of talismanic scripts or the hypnotic contours true-form diagrams, thereby constituting the initial lens through which the urtext of the source is interpreted. Fully cognizant of their effect on the gaze of readers, some compilers consciously foreground the paratext and render the legible text as offtext (see fig. 3). In other cases, such as the striking Buddhist “pagoda scriptures” (*jingta* 經塔), by which readers reconfigure text into a religious architecture following a narrative itinerary (fig. 4), or the “sectioned texts” (*kewen* 科文), whose structure and argument are displayed schematically, the text espouses the shape of a talismanic or diagrammatic paratext.³⁰ These examples are especially clear illustrations of how scriptures could acquire fully paratextual

30. See Michael Lackner, “Les diagrammes d’analyse textuelle : une pratique savante de la tradition chinoise,” in *Lieux de savoir 2. Les mains de l’intellect*, ed. Christian Jacob (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), 827–828; and, by the same author, “Diagrams as an Architecture by Means of Words: the *Yanjitu*” in Bray et al., *The Warp and the Weft*, 342–343.

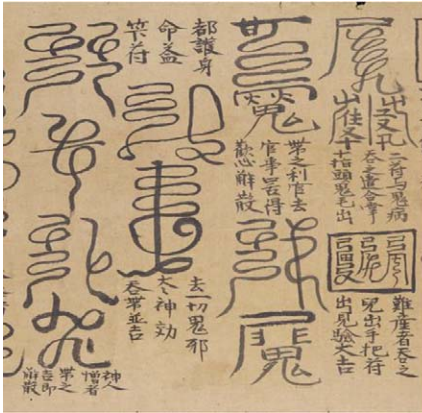


FIG. 3 AND FIG. 4. A text consisting of talismans with appended instructions (left) from the S.2498 Dunhuang manuscript of the *Quintessential Incantation of Vajrakumāra* (*Jingang tongzi xinzhou* 金剛童子心咒); and a pagoda scripture (*jingta*) (right) version of the *Heart Sūtra* (*Xinjing* 心經), S.4389. From the British Library, <http://idp.bl.uk/>

roles as material artefacts, subverting the primacy of text not only with respect to the semantic rapport between text and offtext in their pages, but also with respect to the physical source itself, whereby their functions as tangible sacred diagrams or talismanic objects overshadowed their content altogether.

3. PARATEXTS IN BUDDHIST SOURCES

Talismans and diagrams were pervasive indigenous Chinese implements that surfaced in state rituals (whether properly cultic or juridico-administrative), vernacular religious practices, and perhaps most prominently, institutional Daoism. In their Buddhist incarnations, too, they vividly highlight the aforementioned crucial inversion between text and paratext as well as the precedence of objecthood in that relationship. More importantly, it is arguably in the sources of the “Esoteric Teachings Section” (*mijiao bu* 密教部) of the Sino-Japanese Buddhist Canon that we find the most lucid examples of how Chinese religious paratexts are not only imbricated with notions of materiality, but, as we shall see, with notions of corporeality as well.

During the early medieval period, from around the same time that their polemicists declared the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* to be a forgery, Chinese Buddhists began to adopt talismans and diagrams along with the practices to which they belonged, and reformulated them to match their own pantheons, metaphysics, and cosmologies. Talismans were seamlessly incorporated into Buddhist manuscript and canonical sources.³¹

31. For canonical scriptures from the *mijiao bu* that prominently feature talismans, see for example T.1219, T.1229, T.1238, T.1265, and T. 1331, all of which are discussed by Michel Strickmann in the chapter on “Ensigillation,” 123–193, from his *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); see also T.1307, examined by Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), in the broader context of Buddh Daoist talismans; see especially Chapters 2 and 4 of her book. See also Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and*

Less common but nonetheless significant was the Buddhist use of cosmic or true form-like diagrams (*tu*), often in combination with talismans.³² From the point of view of rhetorical strategy, assimilating the ritual objects afforded the benefit of their semantic associations without any of the inconvenience of imposing new and foreign epistemic tools.³³ Talismans and diagrams were concrete and familiar religious implements that afforded real-world results at the same time as they reinforced political legitimacy, marked advantages for those among the Buddhists who operated in elite circles and were vying with Daoists for imperial sponsorship. The opening of the *Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Five Sciences (Longshu wuming lun)*,³⁴ most likely from the late sixth century,³⁵ is unambiguous about its target-audience and the intended applications if its methods:

the Ritual Imagination in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), especially Chapters 1 and 2; and Robson, "Signs of Power."

32. On the general topic of images and diagrams in the development of medieval Buddhist ritual technologies, see Koichi Shinohara, *Spells, Images, and Maṇḍalas: Tracing the Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Rituals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). More often than not, diagrams in Buddhist sources are sketches of ritual areas, but in other cases, they are closer to the cosmic and/or true form diagrams discussed earlier; see for example T.1103, T.1299, T.1308, T.984, and T.914. The pairing of talismans and especially cosmic diagrams have a historically turbulent relation with Buddhist orthodoxy because of their unmistakably Daoist associations. In some ways, it is remarkable that they even found a place in the Sino-Japanese Buddhist Canon. As an enduring sign of underlying uneasiness, out of the 5,320 texts canonized in the revised Taishō Tripiṭaka, only about two dozen contain talismans or their ritual relatives, seals (*yin* 印) (According to Xiao Dengfu's tally in *Daojiao xingdou fuyin yu fojiao mizong*, 194–195, there are 31 such texts). This figure stands in stark contrast to the roughly 400 sources with talismans out of 1,487 texts of the authoritative fifteenth-century recension of the Daoist Canon. In comparison to canonical sources, Buddhist manuscripts from Dunhuang notably display a higher number of texts with talisman and diagrams, suggesting a closer relationship between the ritual objects and non-canonical or vernacular forms of Buddhism. In his discussion of sources pertaining to the talismanic rites of the Buddhist deity Ucchuṣma, Yang Zhaohua, "Devouring Impurities," 90–102 has demonstrated how illustrations of talismans or seals underwent significant doctoring and suppression from one edition of a text to another. After a veritable tug-of-war around the inclusion of Ucchuṣma talismans, the "unofficial line" won out over the "official line" when images of the implements were finally canonized around 1137 in the Sixi 思溪 edition of the Tripiṭaka—an impressive achievement after having been excluded from the Koryō 高麗 canon of 1087. This constitutes more of an exception to the rule since overall, talismans were systematically purged from canonical recensions; many of the talismans that survive in the early twentieth-century Taishō Tripiṭaka were salvaged from oblivion and painstakingly reconstructed. See Yang, "Devouring Impurities," 260–262.

33. Remarking on the Buddhist adoption and re-formulation of Daoist ritual elements, Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 140 observed: "...the familiar gains vastly in authority by being rendered exotic."

34. The five sciences (or five studies; *pañca-vidyā*) of India refer to *śabda*, grammar and composition (*sheng* 聲); *śilpakarmasthāna*, the arts and mathematics (*gongqiao* 工巧); *cikitsā*, medicine (*yifang* 醫方); *hetu*, logic (*yin* 因); and *adhyātma*, philosophy (*nei* 內). For the last term, see William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: With Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index* (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1937]), 119, where they cite Monier Williams' definition as follows: "the 'knowledge of the supreme spirit, or of ātman, the basis of the four Vedas; the Buddhists reckon the Tripiṭaka and the 十二部教 as their 内明, i. e. their inner or special philosophy." In China, this list is known as the "internal" (*nei* 內) Five Sciences. It is complemented by another, lesser-known list of the "external" (*wai* 外) Five Sciences: these start off in a similar way, with grammar and composition (*sheng*), the arts and mathematics (*gongqiao*), and medicine (*yifang*), but logic and philosophy are replaced with the incantation methods (*zhoushu* 呪術) and talismans and seals (*fuyin* 符印). The *Longshu wuming lun* privileges the external Five Sciences, with particular emphasis on the latter two.

35. A *Wuming lun* 五明論 (Treatise on the Five Sciences) in one scroll (*juan*) is listed in the *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀 (Record of the Three Treasures Through the Ages; T.2034), 100b4, and dated to 558; see also the *Da Tang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄 (Record of the Buddhist Canonical Scriptures of the Great Tang; T.2149), 55.271c; and the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄 (Record of the Teachings of Śākyamuni of the Kaiyuan era; T.2154), 55.544c. From these sources, we also learn that Rangnabatuoluo 攘那跋陀羅 (Jñānabhadra) and Shenayeshe 闍那

At the time [of King Aśoka (r. 268 BCE–232 BCE)], there was a South Indian monk who was previously a non-Buddhist but he came to admire the Dharma and left his family.³⁶ He addressed the king saying, “In the past I sought ways among the heterodox teachings to benefit the people. Today I leave home and enter into the Dharma of the Buddha. He also has ways to benefit sentient beings.³⁷”

于時有南天竺國比丘舊是外道慕法出家。如白王言。我昔尋外法中有利益人民之法。今日出家入佛法中。亦有利益眾生之法。

The monk proceeds to list a number of Buddhist techniques, stressing that these are comparable and equal to the methods of heterodox teachings for benefitting the people. First and foremost, he lists the use of talismans (*fū*), which are tied to therapeutic cures as well as rain-making rituals. Upon hearing of this Aśoka, the storied Indian Buddhist monarch, was greatly pleased:

The king stated, “I command that you use these means to benefit all sentient beings.” Thus, on the seventh month of the seventh day one should take seven stalks of mountain-cloud bamboo seven *chi* in length and place drawn talismans inside them. The talismans should say, “May Indra instruct me on how to benefit sentient beings. May all dragons and ghosts follow my command.” Also take a willow branch and carve it into a human effigy. Construct an altar out of willow and place it on top. After circumambulating the altar recite the spell saying, “I take refuge in Indra. May wind

耶舍 (Jinayaśa) undertook the translation of the *Wuming lun* in Chang’an’s 長安 Pojie 婆伽 (Bhagavat) monastery; see Young, *Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 170–171. The connection and potential identity between the *Wuming lun* and the *Longshu wuming lun* (Nāgārjuna’s Treatise on the Five Sciences) was underscored by Osabe Kazuo 長部和雄, *Tōsō mikkyō shiron ko* 唐宋密教史論考, who cites the work of Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖, *Mikkyō hattatsushi* 密教發達志, 5.17 (but as Young, *ibid.*, 171 n. 48, points out, Ōmura does not refer to the *Longshu wuming lun* at all). Osabe, *Tōsō mikkyō shiron ko*, 234–237, finds similarities in content and style with other sixth century “proto-Tantric” Chinese Buddhist texts. He concludes that although it is firmly grounded in Six Dynasties (220–589) materials, the present canonical version of the *Longshu wuming lun*, which is derived from a Heian-period (794–1195) Japanese manuscript from Sekizanji 石山寺 in Kyoto, was re-edited during the Tang dynasty. This assessment rests on what Osabe identifies as markers of a division between “pure esotericism” (*junmitsu*) and “mixed esotericism” (*zōmitsu*), an analytical cleavage that is now widely considered anachronistic with reference to Chinese materials. Thus, on the basis of Osabe’s account alone, the exact relation between the *Wuming lun* of 558 and the *Longshu wuming lun* remains somewhat unclear. Following Osabe, Davis *Society and the Supernatural in the Song* (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 134, intimates that they are the same text; as does Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 170, who dates the canonical version to the sixth century without providing much in the way of justification. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the two treatises on the Five Sciences are indeed the same text. Sources from the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth centuries already refer to an established tradition of associating Nāgārjuna with talismans, seals, and alchemical elixirs; see the *Xin huayan jing lun* 新華嚴經論 (Treatise on the New Flower Garland Sutra; T no.1739) 36: 895b by Li Tongquan 李通玄 (635–570) and the *Zhiguan fuxing chuanhong jue* 止觀輔行傳弘決 (Instructions for Propagating the Expanded Practice of Calming and Contemplation; T.1912), 46.445c, dated to 765; cited from Stewart Young, *Conceiving the Buddhist Patriarchs in China*, 171 and 180, respectively. Aside from Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, and Osabe, *Tōsō mikkyō shiron ko*, the work of Davis, *Society and the Supernatural*, 134–136, more recently, Young, *Conceiving the Buddhist Patriarchs*, 170–177, provides useful overviews of Nāgārjuna’s *Treatise on the Five Sciences*; in Chinese, see Xiao Dengfu 蕭登福, *Daojiao shuyi yu mijiao dianji* 道教術儀與密教典籍 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 2004), 399–406.

36. Leaving the family (*chujia* 出家) is a common circumlocution in Buddhist sources to express entering the monastic order.

37. *Longshu wuming lun*, 1.956c.

spirits come to the aid of sentient beings. May fire spirits come to cast light. May rain spirits come to ripen the crops. May treasure spirits come to distribute wealth. May earth spirits come to comfort sentient beings. For whomever and for whatever concern, I command it. This year all shall be suitable. Take haste! Take haste! As if commanded by law”³⁸

勅用其法皆利一切衆生。當如七月七日取山雲竹七枚長七尺者。置畫符中。其符曰。天帝教我利益衆生。一切龍鬼隨我使令。又取章柳刻作人形。作一壇以章柳置上。以遶壇側然後呪曰。歸依天帝釋。風神來濟衆生。火神來起光明。雨神來百穀熟成。寶神來錢財集。地神來安穩衆生。爲某甲爲某事令使。今年皆悉稱。急急如律令。

The ritual efficacy of the talismans is undisputed by Aśoka. The Buddhist ruler wastes no time in adopting them as part of his governing strategy, for which they are perfectly suited. In addition to benefitting his subjects, they also increase the prestige and authority of his rule, establishing a direct link between himself and the deity whose true name is depicted in the talismans, Indra, the martial protector of Buddhism and emperor of Heaven. For medieval Chinese readers of *Nāgārjuna’s Treatise on the Five Sciences* and the potential royal sponsors among them, the talismans depicted in the text’s folios were unmistakable signs of divine patronage—despite their illegibility, which is never even mentioned. At the same time, by virtue of their material resonance with imperial sacraments and, as in this example, juridico-administrative logic, they embodied political expediency as well.

In his study on magical medicine in medieval China, Michel Strickmann devotes a full chapter to the topic of Buddhist talismans (*fu*) and seals (*yin* 印), where he describes *Nāgārjuna’s Treatise on the Five Sciences* as “[p]erhaps the most idiosyncratic document of the medieval fascination with seals and sealing,” and “the most elaborate single text on seals and sealing that [he has] found.”³⁹ Seals refer to typically wooden or stone stamps into which talismanic script is engraved and then impressed onto a two-dimensional surface (see fig. 5); in ritual terms they are indissociable from the talismans they help produce. The following passage from *Nāgārjuna’s Treatise on the Five Sciences* is representative of the talismanic sealing methods contained in the source:

If you wish to bestow benefits on all sentient beings and eliminate their illnesses and hardships, you should use this seal and lead the afflicted into a room. Bathe their bodies with aromatic water. Then, impress the seal on the spot where the ailment is. No [illness] will remain unhealed.⁴⁰

若欲與一切眾生除其病難者。當用此印將病人在一室。以香水浴身。隨有病處以印印之。無不得差。

Overall, *Nāgārjuna’s Treatise on the Five Sciences* can be described as a catalogue of sealing and talismanic methods whose broad scope encompasses everything from healing illness and becoming invisible to transforming soil into food to stave off hunger and manifesting

38. *Longshu wuming lun*, 1.957a.

39. Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 170 and 171, respectively.

40. *Longshu wuming lun* (T.1420), 964a12.

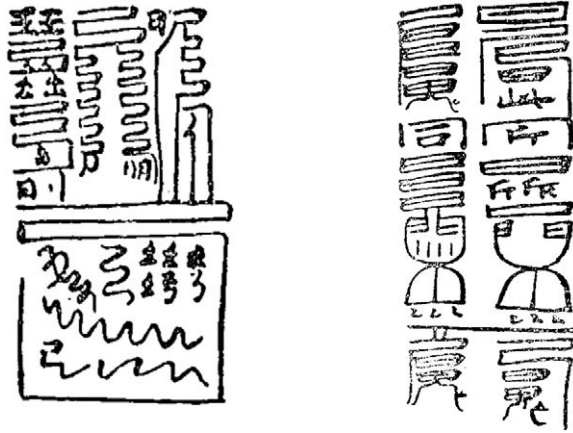


FIG. 5. A sample seal (*yin*) (left) and talisman (*fu*) (right) and from *Nagārjuna's Treatise on the Five Sciences* (*Longshu wuming lun*; T.1420), 965c and 968a, respectively.

oneself as the indestructible diamond body of the Buddha.⁴¹ The instructions below offer a typical sample of how its talismans are produced and employed:

The first [of eighteen talismans] is the talisman of the Seven Buddhas and the Seven Spirits. This talisman concerns bodily afflictions experienced by those from one to one hundred years of age, whether old or young. [...] take a piece of white unprocessed silk one chi [foot] in length. Draw the talisman with real cinnabar and hang it from your sash. The hundred illnesses will be dispelled. Men must wear it on the left, and women on the right.⁴²

第一七佛大神符。符主人身百年之中。或老或少。[...] 以素生絹一尺。真朱沙書此符佩之。百病去除。男左女右。

Much like in Daoist sources such as the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* or as with the preceding passage which relied on a healing seal, in these lines, the paratextual writing that represents the sacred names of the Seven Buddhas and Seven Spirits is immediately efficacious as soon as it is ritually activated and materialized onto a piece of silk. The writing it bears is inconsequential. From the moment that it is made into a ritually activated tangible object, its full apotropaic and healing potential is deployed.

Let us turn to the central ritual of *Nagārjuna's Treatise on the Five Sciences* in order to examine how materiality and paratextuality of ritual implements are interlaced with corporeality. The text's central and most emblematic ritual, one that combines both talismans and a prominent diagram, is described in a section titled "Sūtra and Diagram

41. See Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 170–178; See also Young, *Conceiving the Buddhist Patriarchs*, 170–175. For a brief overview of the text with a focus on its therapeutic practices, see Dominic Steavu, "Apotropaic Substances as Medicine in Buddhist Healing Methods" in *Buddhism and Healing in East Asia*, ed. Pierce Salguero (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017): 441–453.

42. *Longshu wuming lun* (T.1420), 957b25.

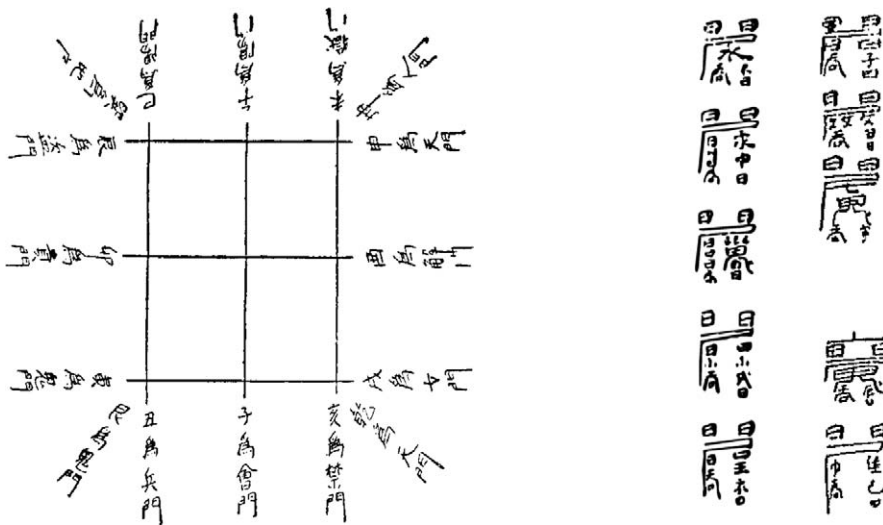


FIG. 6 AND FIG. 7. Diagram (left) and accompanying seals (right) from the “Scripture and Diagram of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions” (“Longshu pusa mijue tujing”) section of *Nāgārjuna’s Treatise on the Five Sciences*, 958bc.

of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions” (“Longshu pusa bijue tu jing” 龍樹菩薩祕決圖經). The instructions are impressionistic; from the mention of a number of features including the twelve chronograms (*shi’er chen* 十二辰; alt. the “twelve times” *shi’er shi* 十二時) and the Four Gates (*simen* 四門) of the intercardinal directions, we may ascertain that the diagram is a map of cosmic time and space. After a few lines, the reader gains a clearer indication of the ritual’s purpose. Using the talismans to call on deities, adepts are meant to navigate through the cosmic ritual area and meet with summoned gods:

In conformity with the method of the twelve times, emerge from and re-enter [the ritual diagram], intone [the spells], and activate the seals. Thereupon, you will have access to the gods who [will aid you] in fathoming auspicious and inauspicious matters [...]. You will completely determine questions of life and death.⁴³

依十二時法出入誦行印。諸神吉凶皆達。[...] 悉決生死。

Despite the instructions, details remain blurry, particularly with respect to the specific role of the cosmic diagram. The text is equally unclear about the activation of the seals and the meaning of the script that constitutes them (fig. 4). It is almost as if these details are unimportant, as if seals/talismans and diagrams fulfill their purpose simply by being included in the textual description of the ritual.

Thus, in Buddhist sources too, talismans and diagrams operated as paratextual devices. At first glance, they seem to have merely supportive roles as verifiable visual reminders of the ritual’s legitimacy and telegraphic guarantees of its promised outcome. This was, after all, one of the chief reasons why Buddhists fully incorporated

43. *Longshu wuming lun*, 958b–959a.

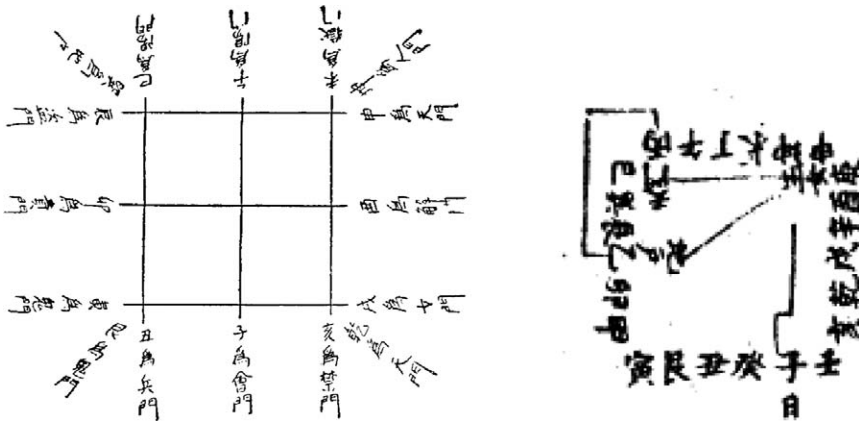


FIG. 8. Diagram from the “Sūtra and Diagram of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions” (“Longshu pusa mijue tujing”) (left) compared to a diagram for the steps for encountering the Jade Maiden (*yunü* 玉女) following the pattern of the Big Dipper (right) from the *Yellow Emperor’s Secret Instructions of the Eight Gates of the Great One for Entering the Cosmograph* (*Huangdi Taiyi bamen rusbi bijue* 黃帝太一八門入式祕訣; DZ 587), 5ab.

these artefacts during the medieval period after having earlier discredited them (at least in polemical circles).⁴⁴

Yet, upon closer inspection, the talismans and diagram fill in important gaps in the textual description of the ritual. They command our attention and actually guide our reading of the source, once more inverting the relation between text and offtext. With their gaze drawn to the puzzling cosmic diagram, readers are compelled to decipher it. And in searching for familiar reference points they ineluctably arrive at the ubiquitous cosmograph (*shi* 式). This instrument was made up of a square lower half, the Earth plate (*dipan* 地盤), which organized time and space coordinates on a grid. The upper half, the Heaven plate (*tianpan* 天盤), was mobile and usually circular. It also bore chronotopic markers. The cosmograph was generally used in divination or calendrical computations by matching certain values from the top plate to others on the bottom plate in successive stages, until a final space and/or time marker was obtained. In Daoism, it was also deployed in divination as well as in summoning rites in order to delineate and calculate sacred space and time. In Daoist texts where its use is ritually prescribed, the cosmograph is represented as a cosmic diagram redolent of the one in our Buddhist text (fig. 8).

The medieval Daoist rite known as the “Jade Maiden Shutting [the Gates] Behind Her” (“Yunü fanbi” 玉女返閉) notably centers on the cosmograph and its manipulation. Its detailed description in the Northern Song-dynasty (960–1127) *Book of the Luminous Mirror of the Six Ren Tallying with Yin* (*Taishang liuren mingjian fuyin jing* 太上六壬明鑑符陰經) completes many of the lacuna in the elliptical “Sūtra and Diagram of the

44. A number of studies have already fleshed out these points, and there is no need to rehearse the details of their findings here. See Robson, “Signs of Power” for Chinese Buddhism, and Seidel “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments” for Daoism’s incorporation of earlier autochthonous notions of talismanic authority and efficacy.

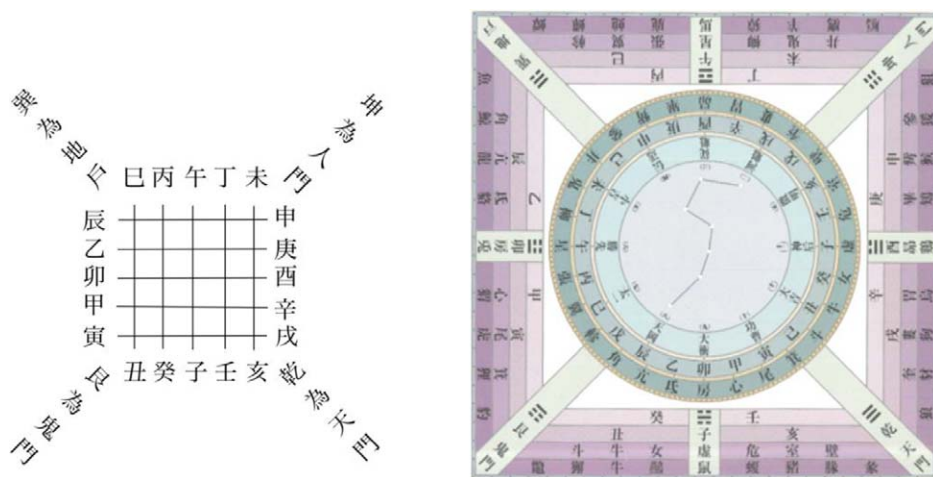


FIG. 9. Reconstituted Earth plate of the *shi* cosmograph from the “Sūtra and Diagram of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions” (“Longshu pusa mijue tujing”) with added interpolary horizontal and vertical axes corresponding to the ten celestial stems (*tiangan* 天干) on the basis of the description from the *Luminous Mirror of the Six Ren Tallying with Yin* (*Taishang liuren mingjian fuyin jing* (left). For comparison, a complete *shi* cosmograph from the Six Dynasty (220–559), with celestial stems and early branches (*dizhi* 地支), the Four Gates (*simen* 四門) and the intercardinal directions, all present on the Earth plate; the Big Dipper acts as a pivot at the center of the round Heaven plate (right). Reproduced on the basis of *Abe no Seimei to Onmyōdō*, 53.

Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions.”⁴⁵ Through a close comparative reading, it becomes apparent the Buddhist diagram is the square Earth plate of a cosmograph; it also comes to light that Buddhist adepts were intended to act as the mobile Heaven plate, thus recreating and embodying a fully functional cosmograph within the ritual area. They oriented themselves according to the Earth plate and then peripatetically crossed the ritual area by rotating and tracing the pattern of the Big Dipper (see figs. 8 and 9) in order to eventually end up at the calendrical marker corresponding to the day and time that the practice was undertaken. Once they arrived at their destination on the grid, adepts could escape the yoke of conventional space-time and enter the realm of true form (*zhenxing*). There, they met the deity summoned by means of the accompanying talismans, perhaps Nāgārjuna bodhisattva as the section’s title suggests. In the Daoist version, they met the Jade Maiden (*yunü*), who lends her name to the rite.

Subsequently, adepts could inquire with the conjured deity about spiritual matters or more mundane concerns such as health, wealth, or fate, before returning to the phenomenal world.⁴⁶ Alternatively, they could prolong their sojourn in the parallel

45. To my knowledge, the *Taishang liuren mingjian fuyin jing*, 4.2a–7b, contains the fullest description of the “Yunü fanbi” among extant Daoist sources. Other sources offer more schematic accounts of the rite; see for instance *Huangdi Taiyi bamen rusbi bijue* 黃帝太一八門入式秘訣 (Yellow Emperor’s Secret Instructions of the Eight Gates of the Great One for Entering the Cosmograph; DZ 587), 12a–15a.

46. The Daoist Canon holds a number of scriptures that explicitly describe the use of a *shi* cosmograph for various but similarly prognosticatory ends; see for example, the *Huangdi longshou jing* 黃帝龍首經 (Yellow

imaginal realm, hide their bodily form (*dunxing* 遁形) to escape their woes or search for concealed medicines of immortality. Since true forms consist of unmediated manifestations of the image (*xiang*) of the Dao, they are only visible to supernatural beings and the higher rungs of the spiritually accomplished; thus, to the eyes of common mortals, adepts were effectively invisible when they entered the placeless space of true form, or rather, they were “illegible.” As Ge Hong, the author of the *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* relates, by crossing over into the alternate spiritual dimension, adepts could “immerse themselves in the invisible, just as the sun sinks into the earth and the sun and moon lose their brilliance—so that neither man nor demon may be able to perceive them.”⁴⁷

Without the talismans and diagram in the “Sūtra and Diagram of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions,” it would be virtually impossible for uninitiated readers to decode what the ritual was about. Such sources were esoteric by design, and it was the role of masters to bestow the keys to their understanding upon novitiates in the form of oral instructions. Yet, with the addition of the paratextual elements and their visible parallels with well-known Daoist analogues, even a neophyte or accidental reader could infer some general impression about the ritual’s tenor. The talismanic script and diagram, two-dimensional representations of objects-to-be, are primordial in establishing the manner in which the text that describes the practice should be read. To a large degree, they are already fully formed material artefacts since they are illegible yet semantically charged paratextual objects, much akin to the binding of a book, the ink in which it was written, or even the type of paper it with which it was composed. Accordingly, as we have seen with Daoist sources, in such cases where talismans or cosmic diagrams figure prominently at the center of a text, the paratexts subsume the text, which is then primarily defined not by its content but by its apotropaic or conjuring powers—the same ones afforded by its talismans or diagrams. Yet, in the instance of the “Sūtra and Diagram of the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna’s Secret Instructions,” the paratext exceeds its bounds to

Emperor’s Scripture of the Dragon Head; DZ 283), the *Huangdi jinkui yubeng jing* 黃帝金匱玉衡經 (Yellow Emperor’s Scripture of the Golden Casket and Jade Scales; DZ 284), and the *Huangdi shou sanzhi xuan nü jing* 黃帝授三子玄女經 (Scripture of the Jade Maiden Transmitted by the Yellow Emperor to his Three Disciples); see Marc Kalinowski, “Les instruments astro-calendriques des Han et la méthode Liu Ren,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 72.1 (1983), 396–402, for an overview of these sources; and more recently, Dominic Steavu, “The Allegorical Cosmos: The *Shi* 式 Board in Medieval Taoist and Buddhist Sources” in *Coping with the Future: Theories and Practices of Divination in East Asia*, ed. Michael Lackner (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 196–232.

47. The full passage from *Baopuzi*, 17.301, reads:

Moreover it is said that [with this method adepts can] escape the chaos of the world and cut off their traces on famous peak; on an Upper Prime *ding mao* day, at the time that is called “Yin virtue” or “Celestial Heart,” [this method] enables those who are without concern or worry to immerse themselves in the invisible, just as the sun sinks into the earth or the sun and moon lose their brilliance—so that neither man nor demon may be able to perceive them.

又曰，避亂世，絕跡於名山，令無憂患者，以上元丁卯日，名曰陰德之時，一名天心，可以隱淪，所謂白日陸沈，日月無光，人鬼不能見也

Dated to the first half of the fourth century, this is the earliest passage in received literature to mention the hidden stem (*dunjia* 遁甲) method, a generic name for all rites that enable practitioners to disappear into the realm of true form (with or without the aid of a cosmograph). One century later, the term surfaces in a list of divinatory techniques recorded in the official history, the *Houbanshu* 後漢書 (Book of the Latter Han), 112A.1a13.

subsume not only the entirety of the physical text, but the reader as well. Adepts themselves constitute three-dimensional projections of the two-dimensional objects represented in the scripture. They literally embody the paratexts, providing a locus for the intersection of paratextuality, materiality, and corporeality in their very person.

4. PARATEXTS, TRUE FORM, AND CORPOREALITY: THE CASE OF THE METHOD OF THE GREAT COMPASSIONATE WISDOM SEAL OF AVALOKITEŚVARA

The majority of paratextual diagrams that dot the pages of the Sino-Japanese Buddhist Canon are related to technical ritual objects, depicting iconographic details or cosmic sacred spaces (altars, maṇḍalas, or as in the above cited case, a *shi* cosmogram). A few of them could be visualized in contemplation practices. True form diagrams (*zhenxing tu*) (Fig. 2), however, are noticeably absent from the texts of the Taishō Tripiṭaka. Perhaps the notion of true form was too closely associated with Daoist theology, in contrast to the more generic talisman. Buddhists had in the first place an equivalent notion similar enough that no direct borrowing was necessary: “*Samaya* embodiments” (*sanmeye shen* 三昧耶身) and “*samaya* forms” (*sanmeye xing* 三昧耶形, *sanxing* 三形) constituted a fully-formed conceptual bridge to the Daoist notion of true form. These terms refer to shorthand allusive icons for buddhas and bodhisattvas that express the divine beings’ spiritual essence or fundamental quality. Moreover, *samaya* (from *sam*, “together; and *aya*- “going”) can be rendered as “joining together” as a tally, one of the earliest meanings of *fu* (“talisman”).⁴⁸ The *samaya* constitutes the emblematic form and proof of a buddha’s or bodhisattva’s spiritual quality.⁴⁹ This relationship between emblematic form and fundamental spiritual essence is evocative of the one shared between talismanic writing or true names (in this case the form) and true form (the essence) in Daoism. In Buddhist sources, *samaya* are sometimes represented graphically and integrated into diagrams, as in the example below (Fig. 10).

In this paratext from the *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva Which Pervades the Dharma Realm, Benefits Sentient Beings, and Perfumes Thusness* (*Guanzizai pusa da beizhi yin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongsheng shun zhenru fa* 觀自在菩薩大悲智印周遍法界利益衆生薰眞如法), the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteśvara (Ch. Guanyin 觀音) is depicted through its *samaya* form as a lotus flower atop a *vajra* or “thunderbolt.”⁵⁰ The *samaya* is placed against a diagrammatic background representing the lid of an incense burner which also doubles as a maṇḍala—a cosmic diagram in the same vein as the cosmograph (*shi*). The lid is inscribed with the the syllables *om, va, jra, dba, rmma*, five out of the six seed-syllables (Skt. *bija*; Ch. *zhongzi* 種子) that

48. The term can also be translated as “coming together,” “meeting,” “in agreement”; for a standard gloss, see Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 67.

49. In contrast to the talisman or true form, however, *samaya* forms incorporate an oral/aural component as well, since “spiritual quality” simultaneously manifests and is determined by the Buddha or bodhisattva’s original sacred vow.

50. This brief text is attributed to Amoghavra 不空 (705–774) but otherwise unattested until the middle of the thirteenth century, in Japan. I am indebted to Peter Romaskiewicz, a doctoral student of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, whose insights on the source have proven valuable.

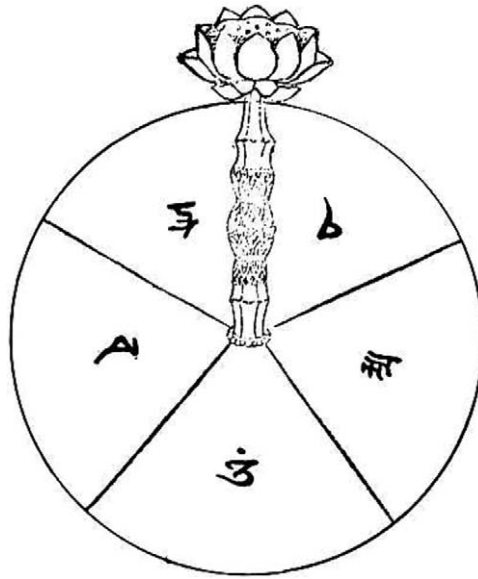


FIG. 10. The *samaya* form of Avalokiteśvara from the *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva Which Pervades the Dharma Realm, Benefits Sentient Beings, and Perfumes Thusness* (*Guanzizai pusa da beizhi yin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongsheng shun zhenru fa* 觀自在菩薩大悲智印周遍法界利益衆生薰真如法; T.1042), 33c.

make up the bodhisattva’s mantra, the oral/aural equivalent to its true name (*zhenming*). The final syllable of the mantra, *hriḥ*, takes shape in the plumes of smoke that emerge from the incense burner during a ritual described in the source. An additional pair of paratextual figures that visually resonate with true Daoist true form charts (*zhenxing tu*) depict this last vaporous syllable. The first of these (Fig. 11) represents an incense seal (*xiangyin* 香印) fashioned in the shape of seed-syllable *hriḥ* 𠄎.

The incense seal functioned as a “combustion clock” or “incense clock”: once fitted into the burner, it was gradually consumed, emitting billows of smoke that could—under favorable conditions—hang above the ritual area in a configuration suggested by the seal. Indeed, the second of the additional images (Fig. 12) shows the shape the smoke should espouse. As the seed-syllable progressively formed, it revealed the “true and basic principle” (*zhen shi li* 眞實理), the “dharma of emptiness” (*kongfa* 空法), which is identified with four principles corresponding to the four glyphs that make up the syllable.⁵¹ In turn,

51. The four principles are assigned to each of the major curvatures of the syllable so that the sequence is read once sequentially and once in reverse, with some phrases being duplicated. They appear on the image, *Guanzizai pusa da beizhi yin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongsheng shun zhenru fa* (T.1042), 33b, in the following order: “the unfathomable cause of all dharmas, [it is] pure and undefiled, pure and undefiled, unknowably unimpeded, unknowably unimpeded, originally unarisen and unextinguished, originally unarisen and unextinguished, therefore unknowably



FIG. 11. True form diagram-like rendering of the incense seal (*xiangyin*) that is consumed to produce the plume, *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara*, 34a.

the smoke transformed and produced all the bodies of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, which come to pervade the dharma realm.⁵² Upon pondering the smoke syllable and its transformations, practitioners were granted paranormal powers (*siddhis*), exemption from all obstacles, as well as rebirth in Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss. At the ritual's climax, the smoky *hrīḥ* syllable morphed into the vajra-lotus *samaya* pictured above, before assuming the corporeal form of Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva, which enveloped the practitioner and became their own appearance.⁵³

We may note that the compound “incense seal” (*xiangyin*) is partially derived from the term “seal” (*yin*), a common substitute for “seed syllable” (Ch. *zhongzi* 種子; Skt. *bīja*).⁵⁴ “Seals” also refer to *mudrās*—codified hand gestures that embody and activate a deity’s power—and, more germanely, to stamps engraved with otherworldly script.⁵⁵ Further

unimpeded, pure and undefiled, pure and undefiled, [it is] the unfathomable cause of all dharmas.” Thus, the glyph *ha* 𑖦 (賀) represents “the unfathomable cause of all dharmas”; *ra* 𑖑 (羅) represents the “pure and undefiled”; *i* 𑖇 (伊) represents the “unknowably unimpeded”; and *h* 𑖦 (惡) represents the “originally unarisen and unextinguished.” Together, these four principles come together in the seed syllable *hrīḥ* 𑖦𑖦, the closing sound of *Avalokiteśvara*’s mantra and the written as well of oral/aural distillation of the bodhisattva’s essence.

52. *Guanzizai pusa da beizhi yin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongsheng shun zhenru fa* (T.1042), 33b.

53. *Guanzizai pusa da beizhi yin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongsheng shun zhenru fa* (T.1042), 33b.

54. For example, “precious seal” (*baoyin* 寶印) is used in reference to the seed syllables of buddhas or bodhisattvas; see Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 476. Another term for incense seals is “buddha-seal” (*yingfo* 印佛), which usually come in the shape of a buddha. This is not to be confused with “seal of the Buddha” (*foyin* 佛印), which denotes the auspicious marks on the Buddha’s chest—habitually an inverted triangle above a lotus or a swastika—or in Chan Buddhism, the inherent and universal proof of Buddhahood present within all people. For more on seals as proof, see below.

55. Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 137, supposes that referring to the talisman-like stamps as *yin*—a term which, although Chinese, had strong foreign consonance due to its other Buddhist uses—was intended to reinforce the image of Indian origins, while, at the same time, making them familiar to the Chinese.

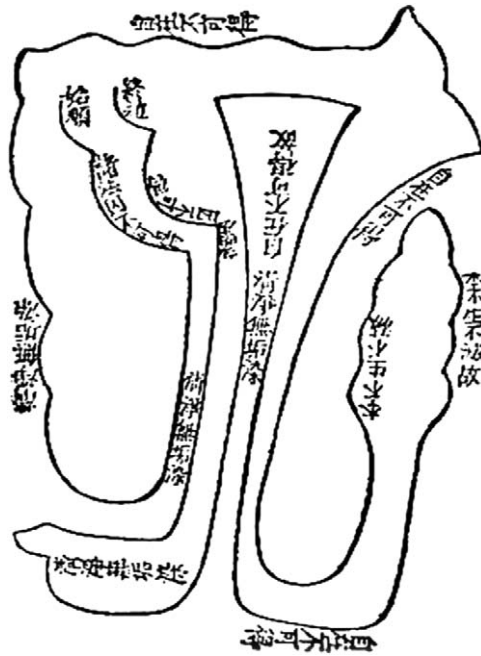


FIG. 12. Incense plume in the shape of the *brih* 唵 seed-syllable associated with bodhi-sattva Avalokiteśvara, *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara*, 33b.

parallels between seed syllables and talismanic script underscore their conceptual proximity. Aside from shared terminology, both are aniconic written distillations of the supernatural potencies they represent, although the seed syllable’s efficacy originally derives from an oral/aural, not written, source.⁵⁶ Both were also largely illegible. In China, seed-syllables were traditionally traced in arcane Indic Siddhāṃ script familiar only to a restricted minority of Buddhist prelates.⁵⁷ As with talismanic script, this feature concretized the seed-syllable’s divine origins and increased its perceived potency. What is more, like their indigenous cousins, seed syllables were conventionally anchored in

56. Seed syllables, seals, and mantras (*zhenyan* 真言), literally “true words” or “perfect words,” are ontologically equivalent. On the related issue of materially-inscribed *dhāraṇī* spells, the ritual cousins of mantras sometimes also rendered in Siddhāṃ script, see Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory*.

57. See Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 137, where the author reflects on the *bija*-laden spells of Buddhist magical medicine in China: “Whereas the Daoist priest was directed to recite spells, commands, and a petition in standard literary Chinese, the Buddhist Master of the Law (whose title itself is Sanskritized as Dharmacarya) had to employ Sanskrit in Chinese phonetic transcription to invoke his divine assistants. Although such Buddhist teachers presumably received oral instruction on the significance of all these names and terms, it is difficult to imagine that the words were at all intelligible to the patient or his family. In any case, the transcriptions are often so idiosyncratic as to puzzle even the modern scholar with all the resources of Buddhist lexicography at his command. We cannot help inferring that this verbal transformation was a very important part of the process of changing Chinese rituals into potent Buddhist operations sanctioned by the authority of the Buddha. In other words, the Indic terms were not translated but only transliterated or transcribed in order to intentionally retain their unintelligibility and by extension, their aura of legitimacy.”

a tangible support medium—for instance, the incense seal, and by extension, the plumes of smoke that emerged from it. Thus, seed syllables were also external symbols, physical emblems, and material proof of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, as the term “seal” implies.

Just as talismanic writing and true form were interwoven expressions of divine nature, so too seed syllables were also imbricated with *samaya* forms. This is readily apparent in the *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara*, which describes the vaporous *brīḥ* seed-syllable gradually morphing into Avalokiteśvara’s *samaya* form, the vajra-lotus. Albeit a tangible object, whether in its paratextual embodiment or its incarnation as an actual beflowered ritual implement, the *samaya* still harks back to the divine being unmediated essence—in other words, its true form. To reiterate, this is the same essence rendered in the bodhisattva’s mantra or seed syllable, the latter functioning simultaneously as sacred symbol and cosmic diagram: as highlighted in the line that appears immediately after the image of the incense seal, “Obtaining entry into this ‘wheel’ [grants] attainment of the most peerless *bodhi*.”⁵⁸ Thus, the incense seal and more importantly the ethereal ribbons of Siddhāṃ script it produced were nothing short of a three-dimensional maṇḍalaic cosmograph projected into the air, one that practitioners ritually entered by immersing themselves in its smoke. By doing so, they also merged and united with Avalokiteśvara. In this reborn perfected physical form, adepts embodied the central object of this ritual—the incense seal—emitting the smoke of enlightenment and enveloping all those with whom it came into contact:

With this present body [practitioners] will behold buddhas and will obtain the *dhāraṇī* named “not defiled by the world.” In the place where they are reborn [the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss], their body will emit a wondrous fragrance and sentient beings everywhere in the ten directions of the realm will become perfumed and all will realize the stage of non-retrogression [...] If they interact with the world to save sentient beings, they will be like the lotus flower that is not defiled by the mud.⁵⁹

現身見佛。得陀羅尼名。不染世也。所生之處身出妙香。遍十方國。衆生得薰。皆證不退。[...] 設交世間。度衆生如蓮華不爲諸垢所染也。

This formidable metamorphosis, by which adepts become a fragrant incense seal and divine bodhisattva at the same time in their very bodies, began with a few two-dimensional diagrams inserted amidst rows of text. These paratexts were paramount in guiding the ritual along to its pinnacle and providing practitioners with a clear understanding of how their embodied transformation would end. They are what the readers continually focused on as their eyes scrolled down strings of words on the page; they are what, in a trance-like meditative state, one part of their minds projected inwardly and aimed to make outwardly corporeal, while the other part decoded the text.

58. 得入此輪至無上菩提; *Guanzi zai pusa yin* (T.1042), 34a.

59. *Guanzi zai pusa yin*, 33b.

5. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Light takes on nothing else than the *imago* of things, which, whether you call it *forma*, or *simulacrum*, or *idolum*, or *species*, or *spectrum*, does not matter, if you understand but that alone, that it represents the thing.

Fabrizio di Acquapendente, *De visione, voce, auditu*, 1600.

In *De memoria*, Aristotle elaborates on the double nature of the image, referring to itself as an identifiable instance of the broader genus of image (*eikon*), and also to something else, that which it specifically represents. That “something else” possessed a very different status depending on the end for which was enlisted.⁶⁰ As semantically malleable but recognized referents to politico-spiritual authority, paratextual talismans and diagrams were ideal carriers of that legitimacy. The sacred character and revelatory aura attributed to illegible writing and diagrams were ingredient to buttressing claims, even in contexts that had little to do with Daoism or Buddhism. In *literati* circles devoted to exegesis and textual analysis for instance, it was commonly held that these devices represented if not embodied unmediated access to supreme knowledge was common currency.⁶¹ The early Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, writing about engraved talismanic images in the 15th century, insisted that they owe their efficacy to their depictions of “figures and numbers” observable in the skies; figures and numbers that “have the greatest affinity with the Ideas in Mind, the Queen of the World,” resulting in a reverberation much like the one between two lutes, with the human instrument resonating as its celestial opposite plays.⁶² Likewise, talismans and diagrams point to the true name, true form or “essence” of that which they depict, embodying a condensed form of knowledge that is not readily apparent in the mundane world to the undeserving eye—one that finds its fullest expression in the Heavens and can only barely, if at all, be fathomed by the human mind.

On the one hand, talismans and diagrams are inscribed in a grammar of unknowing. In this context, illegibility, lack of knowledge, or the absence of a stable signified takes on a positive and transformative function, conferring on the signifier the status of a pure symbol with zero symbolic value—an absence of meaning that inevitably points to a divine and ineffable point of origin and renders any related ritual effective, despite semantic dissonance.⁶³ Relying on the talismans of the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* as a test case for

60. *De memoria*, 450b23–29, paraphrased from Christoph Lüthy and Alexis Smets, “Words, Lines, Diagrams, Images. Towards a History of Scientific Imagery,” *Early Science and Medicine* 14 (2009): 398–439, 425; Harper in “The Magico-Religious Conception of Tu,” on page 4, similarly concludes, although in reverse order, that talismans and diagrams “both crystallize any type of intended knowledge but they also function as the iconic keys to that knowledge.”

61. Michael Lackner, “Les diagrammes d’analyse textuelle,” 828. In the last sentence of the article, Lackner surmises that a line can be drawn between revelatory devotional or meditational diagrams and diagrams related to the comparatively sober pursuit of textual analysis. Echoing this finding and blurring the boundaries even further to include script, Lüthy and Smets, “Words, Lines, Diagrams, Images,” 402–404, explain: “The ease with which words can become patterns and patterns can become images is fascinating—and at the same time highly problematic: for this fluid transition from writing to imaging massively complicates attempts at a typology or taxonomy of epistemic imagery; render the question of the function and role of such images impossible to answer in any general way; and undermines attempts to define the relation between words, concepts, theories, and images.”

62. Citation and paraphrase from Lüthy and Smets, “Words, Lines, Diagrams, Images,” 429, slightly modified.

63. The notion of “pure symbol” is borrowed from Lévi-Strauss, cited in Peter Pels’ “Introduction” in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 20. In the passage,

medieval China, we established in the first section of the article that the unintelligibility of talismanic script achieved this goal while also deflecting the function of producing meaning onto the artefact itself. Thus, on the other hand, at the same time that they conceal meaning, talismans and diagrams reveal meaning through the immediacy of materiality. Francesca Bray has studied the history of technical diagrams (*tu*) in China, yet her findings may be extended to religious talismans and diagrams as well. She signals that the diagram is a functional category rather than an aesthetic or morphological category. One of its chief purposes is direct representation (as in technical illustrations), but even in its simpler incarnations, when pertaining to the creation of sacred space for example, she argues that the formal patterns of the diagram are “guiding the viewer through a strictly ordered trajectory.”⁶⁴ This dimension is more akin to what Barthes calls a “pure and full signification,” a perfect intelligibility through which a medium of representation (in Barthes’ example, catch wrestling performances) empties out interiority to benefit the material exterior, and thus promotes an immediate reading of meaning.⁶⁵

This is precisely what the paratext achieves, and in this capacity, the talismans and diagrams of medieval Chinese religions are prime exemplars of paratextuality. Accordingly, the second section of our article uncovered how talismanic script and diagrammatic images in Daoist and Buddhist scriptures shifted the habitual semantic emphasis from text to offtext, from the notional to the perceptually verifiable. Yet, in religious studies, methodological conventions prescribe minimizing the material dimension of a ritual/sacred object in order to extract and foreground the incorporeal aspect that makes it “sacred.” In other words, scholars of religion tend to approach ritual objects by de-commodifying them, thereby transcending their material condition and entering a new meta-economy of symbolic goods in which value is ascribed not through the usual calculations reserved for objects, but rather through sacred exchanges (of merit or karma, for instance) between people on one hand and the divine, supernatural, or metaphysical on the other. Overcoming objecthood—that is, animating things so as to trace their agency—has been a productive avenue of inquiry.⁶⁶

Pels juxtaposes Michael Taussig’s contribution to the volume, “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic,” on 272–341, which is also relevant to the present discussion, with the findings of Emil Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Henri Hubert concerning representation and magic; on a similar topic, more relevant to East Asia, see Roger Janelli and Dawnhee Yim Janelli, “The Functional Value of Ignorance at a Korean Séance,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 38.1 (1979): 81–90.

64. Francesca Bray, “Introduction: The Powers of *Tu*,” *Graphics and Text in The Production of Technical Knowledge in China*, 1–78.

65. Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 18–19, and 25.

66. A good deal of the spiritual commerce that informs the manipulation of ritual objects or substances—even in pre-capitalist societies—is grounded in classical structures of creating symbolic value for objects or commodities. Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63, especially 41; Appadurai has argued that “commodities represent complex social forms and distributions of knowledge” that, very generally, are either tied to the production of the commodity or to its consumption. This is proposed by other, earlier thinkers as well, perhaps most prominently Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 1981), 65–67, who, building on Marx, writes that an object has four ways of acquiring meaning: use value, determined by an object’s practical implementation or operation (logic of utility); exchange value, determined by an object’s equivalence/economic worth (logic of the market); symbolic value,

Re-investing in the materiality of the sacred, especially when it involves corporeality, can yield just as many insights, and can notably counterbalance the commodity fetishism that contemporary scholars impose on ritual objects. By this I mean the tendency to sometimes occlude the historical context and social relations involved in the production of ritual objects in favor of a focus on emic and self-referential theological analyses. To give an example, commodity fetishism dictates that practitioners ascribe a particular meaning to talismans or even scriptures because they simply understand them to be divinely revealed and not because of a historically and socially constructed series of value significations that contribute to the cultural production of ritual objects (as well as scriptures). Re-centering the study and analysis of Daoist and Buddhist talismans or diagrams on materiality not only paints a more accurate picture of how they were understood in medieval China, but it also enables us to uncover that the spiritual musings, ethereal deliberations, and metaphysical speculations which scholars often focus on as distillations of a religious tradition were actually rooted in concrete historical conditions and social interactions pertaining to paratextual objects, material implements, and the physical body.

The third section of the article centered on the talismans and diagrams from *Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Five Sciences* as well as their externalization as manifested ritual implements. Despite being rooted in imperceptible true name and true form, talismanic writing and cosmic diagrams find concrete expressions when inscribed onto physical supports. After initial disapproval, Buddhists adopted them wholesale as instantly recognizable emblems of divine kingship and immediately verifiable gages of authority over the supramundane. These aspects resonated particularly well with the Buddhist purveyors of “esoteric teachings” (*mijiao*) who strove to simultaneously distance themselves from their “foreign” heritage while catering to the Chinese ruling elite. Most notably, readers of *Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Five Sciences* were enjoined to incarnate part of a ritual implement that is diagrammatically pictured. The text therefore offered a salient example of how paratextuality and materiality converge with corporeality.

The convergence of these themes is even more fully fleshed out in the *Method of the Great Compassionate Wisdom Seal of Avalokiteśvara*, the focus of the fourth and final section. In this source, we witnessed how the paratextual seed syllables (Buddhist equivalents of true names), materialized *samaya* form (Buddhist equivalents of true form), and the bodhisattva to whom they belonged intersected in a single locus, the adept's body. This is not an exceptional example for medieval China; there are numerous parallels in

determined by an object's relative ambivalence in relation to two subjects, a giver and a receiver (logic of the gift); and finally, sign value, determined by the measure of difference perceived between one who possesses an object and one who does not (logic of status). As far as the material culture of religion is concerned, Baudrillard's model has much insight to offer as a complement or alternative to gauging an object's “sacredness” from the standpoint of metaphysics. See for example Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism*, especially 259–273, where the author notably discusses and applies Baudrillard's model. From the sources examined in the present article, it emerges that symbolic value and perhaps especially sign value were crucial components of what made possessing talismans and cosmic diagrams such a privilege in medieval China.

Buddhist and Daoist sources.⁶⁷ It is, however, a scintillatingly clear illustration of how talismanic and diagrammatic paratextual elements defined certain medieval Chinese sources, how they were intricately interwoven with materiality—and also, with corporeality. For ultimately, it was in the body of the adept, whether internally through visualizations or externally through ritual actions, that scriptures were acted out and performed. It was through the physical practitioner, via texts, that the imperceptible realm of gods and spirits, buddhas and bodhisattvas, burst into the mundane world.

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67. For a representative Daoist example pertaining to ritual practices associated with the talismanic diagram known as the *Man-Bird Mountain* (*Renniao shan* 人鳥山), see Fabrizio Pregadio, “The Man-Bird Mountain: Writing, Prophecy, and Revelation in Early China,” *International Journal of Divination and Prognostication* 2: (2020, forthcoming).