

MIEN FANG

Yao Mien Ceremonial Paintings

Text by Linda S. McIntosh

Photos from Kees Sprengers

Photos of the paintings from Stan Fradelizi

PREFACE

We are very pleased to bring you this exceptional exhibition of Yao Mien Ceremonial Paintings. The Mien are a branch of the Yao tribal family that live in South China, North Vietnam, Laos and North Thailand, they adhere to a School of Southern Chinese Taoism that goes back many centuries. The ceremonial paintings from this popular art tradition are rare and little has been written about them. A set of these *mien fang* paintings is central to the Yao Mien belief, and they are an essential piece of religious paraphernalia used in their rituals of purification and the righting of wrongs. The Yao revere these icons quite literally as the abode of the gods. Each set contains specific deities that have their own ritual function and are displayed in different parts of ceremonies; if a piece is not required it is not shown. There is often confusion about the number of paintings in a full set because the owner of a set on sale might have decided to keep three or five paintings to be able to perform basic religious rituals.

The works are painted on vertical scrolls, on average 140 by 50cm, and depict deities from the Taoist Pantheon and a full set should contain 17 pieces. At the summit of the Yao pantheon there are the "*Three Pure Ones*" the *fam t'sing* (*To Ta*, *Yen Si*, and *Leng Pu*), they are assisted by the "*Jade Emperor*" (*Nyut Hung*) and the "*Master of the Saints*" (*Seng Tsiu*). Under these powerful figures there is a series of lesser celestial beings, these include nature divinities, various warrior gods and the lords of hell. Besides these larger works there are also a few smaller scrolls, about 50 by 25cm, the number of which might vary in a set. These depict the "*Enforcers of fasting and chastity*". And finally there is a large horizontal scroll that can be 20 by 250cm and that shows the whole Pantheon in procession - *Tom To Luang Tsiau* - "*The Dragon Bridge of the Great Tao*".

A painter might take one or two months to complete a set of paintings and during this time he will work in an atmosphere of religious devotion and ceremonial purity. At the end of this period the painter himself will "*open the eyes*" of each deity as is customary with religious Taoist icons. But the Yao Mien traditions also require a shaman to introduce the gods to these paintings in a special ceremony. When an owner wants to part with his set, because they are "*worn out*", a shaman will perform another ceremony in which the gods are politely invited to depart from these paintings, a set that will be for sale will thus have been de-consecrated. For more information we highly recommend "*Yao Ceremonial Paintings*" a wonderful publication by the French anthropologist Jacques Lemoine from 1982.

We would like to thank the following people: Linda S. McIntosh for her enlightening text about the paintings and textiles in this exhibition; Stan Fradelizi who has gracefully photographed the pieces; Selena Sourignosack and John Medairy who collected the paintings and ceremonial robes and have made this exhibition possible.

Jean-Pierre Dovat & Rik Gadella



In dimly lit homes of the Iu Mien, one can capture glimpses of faces through the smoke. These images of the gods on mien fang paintings only make an appearance when called upon for assistance on earth. Ordained men in the Taoism developed by the Iu Mien and related groups have the sole power to communicate with the gods residing in the paintings. Mien fang, abodes of Taoist deities, play crucial roles in ceremonies that bring salvation to the populace. The deities in their abodes are rarely seen in a traditional setting as religious practices decline in the modern age despite their importance.

The Iu Mien and Related Groups

The Iu Mien group belongs to the Mienic branch of the Hmong-Mien ethno-linguistic family. This group is also known as Mien or Yao, but the latter is considered the prerogative name the Chinese gave this group. The earliest known mention of the name Yao is found in archives from the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). Iu Mien settlements are found in China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam with the largest population (approximately 400,000) in Yunnan and Guangdo Provinces and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China. A population of 40,000 resides in Laos. A closely related group, the Kim Mun, is also found in all of the countries listed above, except Thailand. A population of less than 10,000 live in Laos, where the Kim Mun are also called Lanten and Lao Huay.

Members of the Mienic subgroups are agriculturists, practicing shifting cultivation to grow rice, corn, and other crops. Traditional homes are one level with packed dirt floors, but some households have adopted other domestic architecture styles, such as Tai or Lao style in Laos. The Iu Mien and Kim Mun live in extended

households, and the majority of each household's wealth is spent on carrying out various religious ceremonies and rites of passage, assuring the wellbeing of all of the family members. Rituals required for each male relative to become a priest consume the majority of the household budget devoted in order for living and deceased relatives to reach salvation.

Iu Mien Taoism

The Taoism practiced by the Iu Mien melds Chinese Taoism (Daoism) with ancestor worship and animism. An ancestor shrine is the interior of each Iu Mien home, the setting for numerous Taoist rites. The Iu Mien also believe that all things possess spirits, and good spirits must be enlisted to protect humans. Spirits may wreak havoc in people's lives, and Taoist priests are called upon to banish the malicious beings, as well as call upon good spirits for protection.

Taoism is generally about living in harmony with the Tao or the Way or Road. Numerous schools of Taoism have formed over the centuries, but the school central to Taoism practiced by the Iu Mien and related groups developed during the Chinese Sung Dynasty or in the 13-14th centuries. In Taoism, there is no supreme god, and each deity represents Taoist philosophy. A god's rank in the pantheon of gods is more important than his personal attributes. The highest-ranking deities are the Pure Ones or Celestial Worthies (Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning, the Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure, and the Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Power) who reside at the apex of the cosmos or above the three highest heavens. The founder of Taoism Lao-tzu, or To Ta in Iu Mien, has been deified and is the eldest of the Pure Ones, or the Celestial Worthy of the

Way and Its Power. Other deities reside in other heavens depending on rank. The order priests call upon the deities via the paintings depends on the purpose of a ritual. Iu Mien Taoism is not concerned with alchemy but in maintaining a well-ordered cosmos and well-balanced relationships between humans and the supernatural world. Performing ceremonies allow humans to maintain this balance and to ensure stability and prosperity for all family members.

Priesthood and Ceremonies

The Taoist priests play important roles in society, carrying out rituals related to birth, marriage, and death. They are responsible for appeasing the spirits, healing the ill, and exorcising evil spirits from people and places. As there is a hierarchy in Taoist cosmology, there is a hierarchy in the ranks of priests. Low level or minor altar priests (sai chia) are able to perform basic

ceremonies while master or major altar priests (tom sai chia) are responsible for communicating with deities high up in the Taoist pantheon. Minor altar priest often assist master priests with various rituals. However, all priests are required to read and write Chinese script and must possess various tools, such as the mien fang or the Taoist paintings, to hold ceremonies.

Iu Mien males are introduced to the priesthood during childhood or young adulthood, but the ideal time to ordain at the lowest level of priesthood is 17 years of age. Postulants must study under a master priest, copying textbooks and learning how to conduct rituals. A male is introduced to the pantheon of Taoist deities in a series of rites. The first one is called "hanging the lamps," or kwa tang, which secures each applicant's position among his ordained ancestors. The ceremony concludes with the crossing of



the Seven Stars bridge. The second rite is the "passing the master degree," or tou sai, and the third is "adding functions," or chia tse. The final ceremony is "graduation," or pwang ko. This rite is more elaborate and requires the participants to climb a ladder composed of wooden swords. The major priest presiding over this ceremony recites verse as the others climb the ladder. Generally, most men only partake in the first ceremony due to the expense of the rituals, and a household will hold an ordination for several male family members rather than individual ceremonies to reduce costs.

For the kwa fam toi tang ordination rite, five major altar priests aided by assistants are required to carry out the rite continuously over a period of two days and two nights. The applicants wear red ordination turbans and red ruffs over their dark tunics. Each applicant receives

a candle made of a banana tree trunk, which is lit by his father, a senior priest, and a deputy priest. A newly ordained minor altar priest or little master (sai chia) is able to perform basic ceremonies.

Taoist priests must own various sacred tools to carry out rituals. These accessories are presented to a newly ordained priest and include special clothing, paintings, painted masks, and ceremonial tablets. Each priest owns a ceremonial tablet with details of his ordination, including the names of the major altar priests presiding over the ceremony. A wife of a priest shares the same rank as her husband and will also own a tablet with details of her husband's initiation into priesthood. Women must wear ceremonial attire to attend the ceremonies, and the arrangement of their head covering or clothing symbolizes their rank.



Production of Mien Fang Paintings

When a male member of a household ordains as a priest, he commissions a set of paintings from an itinerant local or Chinese artist. When the artist's fee is agreed upon and usually paid in silver, part of the home is partitioned with white papered-walls covered in white fabric or a small dwelling is built adjacent to the home. The temporary dwelling's walls are also papered white and covered with white fabric because the work must be carried out in a serene and pure setting. Both the artist and members of the household must remain celibate during the process, and visits from sexually active outsiders are generally prohibited during the one or two months required to complete the paintings.

The artist produces his own paints, mixing pigment with glue made from pig's hide. The adhesive provides a glossy look. For the canvass, several pieces of translucent paper are joined together for the required length. Imported paper from China is preferred, but bamboo paper produced locally is also used. The artist first traces the outline of a figure for each painting and then fills in the details. When a painting is completed, several layers of paper are added to its backside, and slender wood poles are placed at the top and bottom to provide rigidity. An inscription is generally placed on the painting of the central Pure One - Yuanshi the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning. The inscription provides details of the date of the commission, the name of the person ordering the paintings, the name of the artist, the price, etc.

After completion, the artist will perform a rite to "open the eyes" of each portrayed figure. A master priest must also perform a ritual to allow the gods to reside in their images. Several rites must be held over a period of three years before

a painting is thought to be inhabited by a deity and be used in ceremonies. If a painting or set of paintings is to be sold or not longer used, another ceremony is held to "close the eyes" in order to request the gods and saints to cease residing in the paintings.

Mien Fang - Taoist Paintings

Since consecrated paintings are thought to inhabit by the deities of the Taoist pantheon, Mien Fang play important roles in rites. Priests display the paintings in ceremonies in order to communicate with the gods. The order of the paintings depends on the ritual taking place. When the paintings are not in use, they are rolled and carefully stored near the ancestral shrine.

A full set consists of seventeen major paintings (occasionally, there are nineteen) and a long scroll symbolizing the bridge between the mundane and supernatural worlds. Depending on his wealth, first level or minor altar priest may only require the first three paintings, commissioning the production of the Hoi Fan minor altar paintings - Tai Wai (the High Constable or White Horse Officer), Hoi Fan (the Sea Banner or Minor Altar), and Heng Fei (the Pantheon of Gods or Administration). He will acquire the others after completing subsequent ordination rites. A master or major altar priest must own all seventeen paintings and a long, painted scroll that serves as a bridge between the worlds. Thus, several artists may be commissioned to complete one set over time.

Besides the major paintings and the bridge, a master priest can also commission smaller paintings and painted masks depicting the faces of major deities. The bridge is also called the Dragon Bridge of the Great Tao, Tom To Luang Tsiau, and plays an important role in funerals, leading the

soul from earth to heaven. On the scroll, priests and people are depicted on the far left, welcoming the deceased's soul, deities, and other heavenly beings. An altar table separates members of the mundane world from those belonging to the supernatural realm. Women symbolizing the Seven Stars and a heavenly orchestra accompany the deceased's soul on a sedan chair, for example. Important gods are found to the right of the sedan chair with the Three Pure Ones at the very end. The scroll is also called a Celestial Pageant due to the range of deities found on the painting.

The Three Pure Ones or Celestial Worthies symbolize the energy of the three highest heavenly realms. They descend to earth from the heavens when priests display their images and call for their assistance. The Celestial Worthies sit on thrones wearing imperial robes and crowns similar in appearance to the crowns given to newly ordained priests. Halos of divine flame encompass their heads.

On a large painting, the Pantheon of Gods is called the Administration or Heng Fei. They may also be depicted on a smaller painting called the Ancestors, or Tsu Tsong. At the other end of the cosmos is the underworld, and the tribunals of hell are also illustrated in another painting. In Hades, there are ten courts with the first court weighing a deceased's good and bad deeds. If the bad outweigh the good, the deceased must proceed to the other courts to receive punishment. The final court decides on the reincarnation of the soul.

In Iu Mien paintings, other deified figures include competing founders of the Chang Celestial Masters sect of Taoism. Supernatural agencies found in Taoism are combined into four groups, which are depicted in pairs on the paintings: the sky and the underworld; and this world and the waters. The six Marshals are grouped onto two paintings, and these paintings must be displayed for any major ritual. Marshal Chao wears an iron



hat and carries a staff of knotted wood. With hideous characteristics of green skin and wings, Marshal Tang, a thunder god, holds a hatchet and other weapons to attack evil. Marshal Hsin is portrayed with a foot on multi-colored clouds, symbolizing stamping on sins.

Priest's Vestment or Dragon Robe (Loo Kwa)

One of the compulsory accessories utilized by a Taoist priest is a long, sleeveless robe or vestment. A priest wears this garment over other clothing during rites, and the robe symbolizes the priest's power over the cosmos. The decoration is often embroidered but may be painted if the garment's owner cannot afford the other type of embellishment, since a woman with specific abilities is commissioned to complete a robe's adornment. The designs and their organization on a robe differ depending on the ethnicity of the wearer.

The priests' vestments displayed in this exhibit are the type the Kim Mun priests utilize. These garments are often called dragon robes because of large patterns of dragons placed on the front side. Often accompanying the dragons are designs of messengers and auspicious symbols. The backside of the vestment features a diagram of the Taoist universe. Waves are found at the bottom while the Three Pure Ones are at the top. In the center, images of the pantheon of Taoist gods and saints, trigrams representing the five elements, and celestial objects, such as the sun, moon, and stars, are depicted. Auspicious symbols in Chinese culture, ceremonial tablets, and Pan Hu, the dragon dog and originator of the Iu Mien people, may also adorn a robe's backside.

Members of the Iu Mien, Kim Mun, and related groups consider Pan Hu, the dragon dog, to be their first ancestor. According to legend, Pan Hu

defeated a general threatening Emperor Ping Wang's domain, presenting the defeated leader's head to the king as ordered. The emperor rewarded Pan Hu with rank of a lord, his daughter's hand in marriage, a body of a human, and a kingdom to rule. The ruler also changed Pan Hu's name to Pan Wang. The Iu Mien and related groups consider that they are descendants of Pan Hu and the princess' offspring.

Conclusion

Taoism is living in harmony with the Tao, the way or road. Taoist rituals have developed over time to meet the religious needs of society, particularly ways to achieve salvation. Ceremonies are performed for various rites of passage, such as birth, marriage, and death, and other occasions requiring intervention from the supernatural.

Society of the Iu Mien and related Mienic groups have experienced changes, particularly in the last half century. Introduction of commercial agriculture and trade, inclusion of males and females in secular education, and assimilation into the culture of the majority have profoundly altered their lives. Government policies have also discouraged the practice of religion, leading to their decline. Although, their religious beliefs continue to be central in the lives of the Iu Mien, less wealth and assets are devoted to holding Taoist rituals, as their priorities change.

As the occurrence of ordinations and Taoist ceremonies decline in Iu Mien society, the production and use of mien fang or the Taoist paintings and other tools lessen. Thus, the number of artists with the ability to produce mien fang has declined. In some instances, the context for production has changed. For example, the paintings are replicated in art schools in Hanoi, Vietnam.

However, these products are never consecrated via priests and rituals; thus, perhaps cannot be called mien fang. Thus, the mien fang whose "eyes have been opened" are rare examples of Iu Mien Taoist religious art.

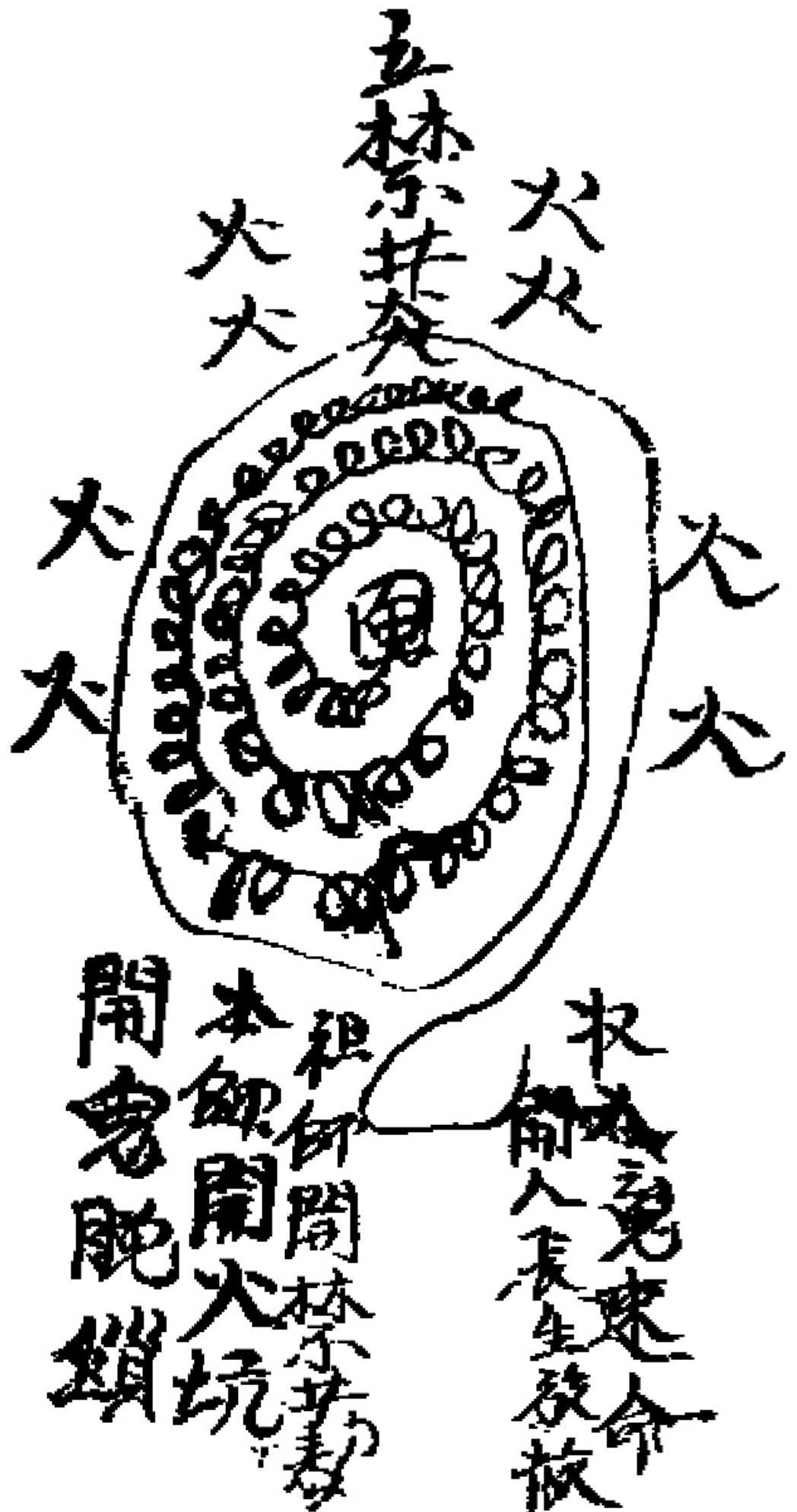
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"The Choreography of steps and jumps
which cause the Baleful Stars to seal the pit"

Catalogue



Heng Fei

*The Full Altar or The Administration
(Panthéon of Taoist Gods)*

The Administration illustrates the hierarchy of Taoist deities. In the top row, the Three Pure ones or Celestial Worthies are flanked by the Jade Emperor on their left and the Master of Saints on their right. The Governor of Sky sits in the centre of the first row from the top. The Three Phoenix Ladies in a moon window are found below the Governor. In the sixth row from the top, mounted officials and cavalry join *Tai Wai*. The God of the Soil and his assistant sit in a shrine at the bottom, left. They record the dates of birth and death of humans. Next to the shrine are five orderlies who come to receive orders to bring injuries to humans. They are mounted on a buffalo, horse, lion, unicorn, elephant, and a tiger.



Tai Wai

The High Constable or White Horse Officer

Tai Wai and his officers *Shang Yuan* (below, left) and *Hsien Fong* lead the celestial army that provides protection during ceremonies.

Tai Wai always rides a white horse, wears a red robe, and holds a sword. These military officers prevent malicious spirits from entering the sacred space during a ceremony.



Hoi Fan

The Sea Banner or Minor Altar

Hoi Fan rides a serpent while holding a bowl of magical water that is used for purification and protection against evil. On the serpent's tail is one of his shoes that he lost while crossing the sea. At the top right corner, the fire wheel symbolizes the ultimate principle, *tai chi*.

Below, The deities *Hoi Fan* and *Tai Wai* are on horseback, carrying metal staves to call upon the celestial troops.



Lingbao or Leng Pu Tianzun

The Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure

Lingbao Tianzun, is considered the youngest of the Three Pure ones or Celestial Worthies. He symbolizes the energy of the heavens. His imperial robe is emerald green, and his head is surrounded by a halo of divine flame. At the bottom are civilian and military attendants. A dragon curls around the military official's feet.

To Ta or Daode Tianzun

The Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Power

To Ta Tianzun is the oldest of the Three Pure ones or Celestial Worthies and represents *Lao-Tzu*, the one who spread Taoist scripture. Haloed in divine flame, *To Ta* is wearing a blue imperial robe. A tiger slinks between the military attendant and jade maiden at the bottom.





Yuanshi or Yen Shi Tianzun

The Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning

Yuanshi Tianzun is one of the Three Pure Ones or Celestial Worthies. He wears a black imperial robe and holds the Pill of Immortality in his right hand. Like the other Pure Ones, *Yuanshi* is haloed in divine flame. His attendants are golden pages and jade maidens. The ceremonial tablet's inscription wishes fecundity, abundance, and prosperity.



Yu-huang or Nyut Hung

The Jade Emperor

The *Jade Emperor* rules over the earth, waters, underworld, and heavens. Seated on a throne, he wears a yellow imperial robe and hat of pearl pendants. He holds a *kui*, or ceremonial tablet, in his hands. In a ritual, a priest must first invoke *Yu-huang* before calling on other gods. The *Jade Emperor* also settles disputes between members of various worlds.



Seng Tsiu

The Master of Saints

Seng Tsiu, the Master of Saints, and *Yu-huang*, the *Jade Emperor*, are almost identical, except the former wears a black imperial robe. *Seng Tsiu* sits under a canopy on a dragon throne. He holds a ceremonial tablet, *kui*, in his hands. Priests call upon *Seng Tsiu* after the *Jade Emperor* during rituals.

Yang Kin and Sui Fo

The Governors of This World and The Waters

Yang Kin, the governor of this world, appears above, *Sui Fo*, the governor of the waters. The former's attendant carries his banner behind him. Both governors wear mandarin caps. Illustrated in the bottom, right hand-side of the painting is a shrine that represents one of the two treasuries in *Iu Mien Taoism*. The amount of spirit money that has been burnt during rites is recorded in the treasuries





Tsiep Tin Ling Hang

The Ten God Tribunals of Purgatory

At the bottom, *Oxhead* and *Horseface* symbolize death. They lead the soul, which is accompanied by maidens, over the *Bridge of No Choice* to the *Land of Hades*. The ten judges consider the good and bad deeds committed by a deceased person are shown in two columns.

Examples of punishment, such as being sawn into two, are depicted in the centre of the painting. The tenth court (top, right column) decides of reincarnation of the soul.

Once sentence has been delivered, the souls are sent to the river beneath the bridge to be swept away and reborn.



Chia Fin

The Forebears

The immediate ancestors of the man who commissioned the set of paintings are depicted in the top row. Images of heavenly beings and deities are also illustrated. The *Twelve Immortal Maidens* are representations of the *Twelve Stars*, which control the fate of humans. The group of seven women symbolizes the *Seven Stars*. Above the *Seven Stars* is the judge who erases the sins and punishments of the family.

Li or Lei T'in Sai
Celestial Master Lei

Master Lei is illustrated standing, wearing a black robe, holding a *kui* ceremonial tablet, and standing on a tortoise. To his left, his sword is planted in an incense holder while a snake twists around it. He represents the founder of one of the schools of Taoism.





Hoi Fan

The Major Altar

In the major altar, *Hoi Fan* leads the ceremony of *Ascension of the Sword Ladder*, an ordination rite. He displays his powers by holding a hot plowshare in his hand in this painting or in his mouth in other illustrations. A high priest at the top of the ladder holds a magical dagger and a horn. There are musician priests and wives of postulants observing the ritual at the bottom, right corner. The head coverings of the wives vary and indicate the priestly rank of their husbands.



Chang or Tsiang T'in Sai

Celestial Master Tsiang

Master Tsiang founded a school of Taoism that competed with *Master Lei's* school.

Like *Master Lei*, *Master Tsiang* is shown standing while holding a *kui*. His sword is planted in an incense holder but to his right. His robe is red and decorated with eight trigrams.



Tin Fo and Tei Fo

The Governors of the Sky and the Underworld

In *Mien Taoism*, the four supernatural agencies are divided into pairs: the sky/underworld and this world/waters. They stand as attendants, wearing mandarin hats. *Tin Fo*, the governor of the sky, stands above *Tei Fo*, the governor of the underworld. *Tin Fo* presides over the sun and moon, the abode of the *Jade Emperor*, and the *Celestial Heavens*.

Tang Tin Yun Suey or Teng Yuan-Shuai
Marshal Tang

A thunder god, *Marshal Tang* is green with wings on his back and tufts behind his ears. He carries a hatchet and other weapons to fight evil. *Marshals K'ang* and *Hsin* accompany him. *Marshal Hsin* (bottom, right) holds a sword while stamping out sin symbolized by multicoloured clouds. This painting and the one of *Marshals Chao* guard the sides of the altar to prevent evil and malevolent forces from entering the sacred space.





Tsiou Yun Suey or Chao Yuan-Shuai
Marshal Chao

The guardian *Marshal Chao* wears an iron hat and brandishes a knotted wood staff. *Marshal Ma* is known as the Powerful Officer (bottom, right). He was born with three eyes, and the third one is found on his forehead. He is beardless with a white chalky face.



Tom To Tsiou, *The Bridge of the Great Tao*

Tom To Luang Tsiou, *The Dragon Bridge of the Great Tao*

The painting serves as a bridge that connects this world with the supernatural worlds. The *God of the Soil* and his assistant stand under a shrine at the far left. Standing to the right of the shrine are priests welcoming the gods. The sacrificial table separates the living from the deities illustrated in the other paintings. Orderlies, the *Twelve Immortal Maidens*, and the *Seven Stars* stand in front of the sedan chair carrying the deceased's soul. An orchestra follows, and *Tai Wai* on his white horse leads the major gods. The *Celestial Worthies* or *Pure Ones* sit in oxcarts at the end of the scroll.

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