

Performing the Heavens:  
Pacing the Void in Daoist Ritual and the Chinese Literary  
Tradition

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My ongoing book project explores the concept of “Pacing the Void” (*buxu ci* 步虛) in Daoist ritual and the Chinese literary tradition from early medieval China through the Tang 唐 (618–907). While the term *buxu* generally connotes the act of ascending to the heavens, it took on varying layers of meaning throughout history. First found in Daoist scriptures and ritual hymns in the fourth and fifth centuries, it was later taken up by secular writers and became associated with a specific literary form, the “Lyric for Pacing the Void” (*buxu ci* 步虛詞), which stands on its own in literary collections such as the *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集. The production of *buxu* writings continued throughout the Song 宋 (960–1279), with emperors, such as Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 997–1022) and Huizong 徽宗 (1100–1126) composing their own sets of *buxu ci*,<sup>1</sup> and into the Ming dynasty, when several of the princes of the dynastic ruling house took great interest in the poetic form and Daoism in general.<sup>2</sup> The Tang period, when Daoist writings, teachings, and ritual performance were ubiquitous across society, bolstered by the imperial family’s support and close association with Laozi, offers a wealth of *buxu* materials to consider. As poets both composed *buxu ci* and engaged with Daoist ideas, represented in both texts and ritual performance, Daoist ritual specialists also continued to write new *buxu* hymns during this period. Thus, I have chosen this period as the primary focus of the book project.

The project broadly aims to explore the early period of *buxu* hymn and poetry production, from roughly the fifth through 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, to gain a better sense of how the concept of *buxu*,

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<sup>1</sup> These are preserved in the *Yuyin fashi* 玉音法事 (HY 607) in the *Daozang* 道藏.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wang, *Ming Prince and Daoism: Institutional Patronage of an Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115–137.

as both a ritual form and a literary trope, evolved over this time, became embedded in the literary tradition, and captured the imagination of poets and rulers for centuries. I begin with a survey of early Daoist scriptural materials from both the Shangqing 上清 and Lingbao 靈寶 corpora, with separate chapters devoted to the two traditions. With special attention to the *Buxu jing* 步虛經,<sup>3</sup> I examine how the *buxu* concept took shape and explore its relationship to other core Daoist ideas. How did *buxu* hymns assume their distinct form? What role did they play within a ritual complex and how were they performed? Some of this groundwork, dealing particularly with early Lingbao Daoist materials, relies on previous work, the bulk from Chinese and Japanese scholars; however, such a survey is necessary to appreciate how later poets engaged with both Daoist scriptures and the performance of the *buxu* rite.

From there I move to consider the *buxu* pieces written by Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581) in the late sixth century at the Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581) court, a watershed moment in the production of *buxu* writings. Yu's *buxu poems* mark a shift from religious hymns to a literary form that could be employed to express a range of sentiments, arguments, and ideas. Most importantly, I attempt to account for the possible reasons Yu Xin turned to this Daoist hymnal form. Who was he writing for and under what historical circumstances? How did he engage with Daoist scriptural ideas?

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<sup>3</sup> The full title is *Dongxuan lingbao yujing shan buxujing* 洞玄靈寶玉京山步虛經 (HY 427).

Yu Xin's pieces were first anthologized in the *Yuefu shiji* alongside those of nine other authors, which are the subject of an additional chapter.<sup>4</sup> Among these authors, Wei Qumou 韋渠牟 (749–801) was the most prolific writer of *buxu* stanzas, with nineteen preserved in the collection, so his *buxu* pieces stand at the center of the chapter. I also consider the shared repertoire of language and imagery in all these works, asking how these authors in writing *buxu* lyrics, were situating themselves in relationship to Daoist doctrine and ritual of the time period. *Perhaps* more importantly, I attempt to elucidate some of the connections between these lyrics and Tang dynasty court music.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, the evidence is scant, but I analyze the prosody and rhyme of these poems in effort to determine whether there were shared poetic features of lyrics, some of which, were likely written for performance and put to music.

Wu Yun's 吳筠 (d. 778) *buxu* poems, which he wrote in the mid eighth century, are reserved for a separate chapter.<sup>6</sup> Like Yu Xin's poems, these pieces exhibit the clearest affinity with early Lingbao Daoist *buxu* hymns. As Wu was an ordained Daoist priest, this invites the question of whether he was writing new forms of the hymns for ritual performance. How are his pieces related to ritual performance, if at all? What connections to Daoist scriptures do they exhibit and are they tied to a specific Daoist textual tradition? Wu Yun was a prolific writer,

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<sup>4</sup> These include Yang Guang 楊廣 (569–618) [Emperor Yang of the Sui 隋煬帝 (r. 604–618)], Chen Yu 陳羽 (fl. 806), Gu Kuang 顧況 (ca. 725–820), Wu Yun 吳筠 (d. 778), Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842), Wei Qumo 韋渠牟 (749–801), Jiaoran 皎然 (720–ca. 795), and Gao Pian 高駢 (ca. 821–887). Another piece by Chen Tao 陳陶 (fl. 841) is titled “Buxu yin” 步虛引. *Yuefu shiji*, 78.4a–10a.

<sup>5</sup> We know, though, that Daoist melodies and tunes existed during the Tang. For example, there was a tune of “Nine Transcendents Pacing the Void” (*Jiuxian buxu* 九仙步虛) among others. See Wang Pu 王溥 (922–982), ed., *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 616.

<sup>6</sup> Outside of the *Yuefu shiji*, Wu's *buxu* poems can be found in his collected works, *Zongxuan xiansheng wenji* 宗玄先生文集 (HY 1045), 2.30b–32b.

leaving behind a body of writings whose works, both poetry and prose, span various genres. Are the *buxu* poems related to his other work and, if so, how? More broadly, how do these pieces fit in the development of the *buxu* poetic genre?

Another chapter explores new Daoist renditions of *buxu* hymns in the Tang dynasty, focusing on those produced by Daoist ritual specialist and reformer Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933). I also survey other pieces preserved in Shangqing-related collections that are of unknown authorial provenance.<sup>7</sup> During the late Tang, Du standardized the protocols for the foremost Daoist ritual of the time, the Yellow Register Retreat (*Huanglu zhai* 黃籙齋), along with several other key rituals; in his efforts, he composed a number of new *buxu* stanzas that were obviously meant to be incorporated into the performance of the retreat.<sup>8</sup> How did he alter their contents and what did the revision of ritual *buxu* hymns signify? What of their performance and place within the ritual? With regards to the new Shangqing verse, I consider how they connect to earlier iterations of *buxu* hymns and their possible function. Early Shangqing scriptures of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries seldom make reference to *buxu zhang* 步虛章 or *buxu ci* 步虛詞, so I ask in what ways, both explicit and implicit, were these new versions attempting to connect to other scriptural tradition and the potential reasons for their composition.

While my book project remains centered on several key sets of *buxu* hymns and *buxu ci*, I also expand the category of “*buxu* writings” to include not just those poems that carry the explicit label of *buxu*, but also writings that simply reference the term. This serves as the subject

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<sup>7</sup> For example, those contained in the *Shangqing wushang jinyuan yuqing jinzhen feiyuan buxu yuzhang* 上清無上金元玉清金真飛元步虛玉章 (HY 1364).

<sup>8</sup> See for example *Taishang huanglu zhaiyi* 太上黃籙齋儀 (HY 507), 26.5a–5b.

of an additional chapter that concentrates on the use of the *buxu* trope in Tang poetry. By expanding the scope of *buxu* works under consideration, we can explore how poets employed the term *buxu* and for what purpose. How did they understand the idea and reinterpret it through other intellectual, often more literary frameworks? Some of these pieces reflect an engagement with Daoist ritual performance, whether through direct observation or an imaginative rendering of a *buxu* rite or music. Why were poets drawn to the idea of *buxu*? Were they really interested in Daoist rites or pursuits or were there more personal considerations at play? Examining these *buxu* materials offers a unique opportunity to consider Daoism's place within the literary tradition. To be sure, Daoist ideas are reflected across a wide range of literary genres over the course of many centuries, to an extent, I would suggest, that has not been sufficiently acknowledged or explored by many Chinese literary scholars. *Youxian* 遊仙 poetry, the closest relative to *buxu* poems, certainly draws on an array of Daoist concepts, language, and imagery. Yet rarely do such materials engage with more esoteric Daoist scriptures and ritual, the origin of the *buxu* idea. In exploring the formation and development of the concept of "Pacing the Void" and related verse, we can more thoroughly understand the relationship between Daoist ritual, both in its textual and performative elements, and poetry.