

RELIGION AND  
SOCIETY IN T'ANG  
AND SUNG CHINA

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## CHAPTER 7

### NOT BY THE SEAL OF OFFICE ALONE: NEW WEAPONS IN BATTLES WITH THE SUPERNATURAL

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Three days after the Honorable Ou-yang had taken up his post as prefect of Ying-t'ien [Honan], he received a local shrine keeper and was told that the Shrine of the Five Gentlemen (Wu-lang miao) was exceedingly numinous. The shrine keeper advised the prefect to pay his respects. Failure to do so, he was reminded, would most certainly provoke disaster. His Honor declined.

One day, as the prefect was taking his meal, a pair of chopsticks suddenly vanished. The next day they were found resting in the hand of a clay image at the shrine. The prefect immediately ordered the shrine barred shut. As he imprinted the seal of his regency, Ou-yang declared by way of warning: "Not to be reopened until after I leave [office]." He was thereby freed from any further disturbances.

The episode above appears in the ten-chapter version of the *Po-chai pien*, an anthology of anecdotes collected by Fang Shao (1066–1141+) from both hearsay and eye-witness accounts.<sup>1</sup> The absence of the protagonist's full name is unlikely to have puzzled the compiler's intended audience. Even if they might have been hard-pressed to supply any evidence, Fang's contemporaries surely realized that the prefect in question was none other than the renowned literatus Ou-yang Hsiu (1007–1072). A chronicle of his life indicates that Ou-yang Hsiu did in fact serve simultaneously as prefect of Ying-t'ien and regent of the southern capital, from the seventh month of 1050 to the third month of 1052.<sup>2</sup> No confirmation of this incident emerges from either biographical data or any of Ou-yang's collected writings. Regardless of its questionable validity, this anecdote and others like it have much to tell us about popular perceptions of Chinese officeholders and their relation to the supernatural. Such accounts offer an invaluable complement to historiographic sources on the subject of the eternal struggle between the realms of *kuan* (officials) and *shen* (spirits).

ity ritual practice? An anecdote ascribed to the *Pei-meng so-yen* seems to imply just such a connection.<sup>133</sup> A Register of Sire Thunder is reported to have been in circulation among villagers of the Pa-Shu (Szechwan) region sometime after the K'ai-yüan era (713–714). It is also said to have been in the possession of a Taoist master in the village of Chiang-ling (Hupeh). Some were of the opinion, the anecdote concludes, that this register was forbidden by patriarchs of the Celestial Master lineage. It was rejected apparently on two grounds. First, the Register of Sire Thunder reportedly was not to be found within the Taoist canon. Second, it appears to have been condemned for its potential destructiveness. Perverse applications, the closing declaration reads, would most certainly invite divine retribution.

A late manual on Thunder Rites in the *Tao-fa hui-yüan* appears to have been aimed precisely at those who practiced the sort of *yen-sha* prescribed in the *Scripture on the Seal Inscriptions of Sire Thunder*. The "Rites for Seizing Perverse Sorcerers" (*Shou-she hsieh-wu fa*), compiled by Lu Yeh and annotated by his disciple Hsü Pi-ta (fl. 1258), provide some of the most specific instructions within the Taoist canon on the curtailment of sorcery.<sup>134</sup> Several restrictions governed their application. First, the "Rites of Seizure" were to be authorized only in cases where it had been determined that a "perverse sorcerer" had committed egregious crimes. Second, it is stated that prior to initiating the ritual procedure, one must inform the censor-in-chief as well as the astral deity T'ien-p'eng.<sup>135</sup> The level of offense justifying the ritual procedure is spelled out in the sample of the notification form to be submitted to the censor-in-chief. Sorcerers who led the masses astray by their perverse ways and then induced fatal nightmares when they did not get what they wanted are deemed subject to the "Rites of Seizure."<sup>136</sup>

The procedure is alternatively dubbed "Rites for Decapitating *Hun*-Souls" (*Chan-hun fa*). As this designation implies, the rites are presented fundamentally as a form of sympathetic magic whereby one envisions the capture and confinement of the villain's *hun*-souls and other vital forces within talismans resembling human figures (figure 7.1).<sup>137</sup> An incantation to be recited upon visualizing the seizure itself, however, seems to suggest that this ritual of substitution may have been conducted in direct correspondence to the censor-in-chief's actual pursuit of the sorcerer at large.<sup>138</sup> Decapitation by hachet is the punishment specified for any who dared resist the forces under the command of T'ien-p'eng. A rigorous interrogation awaited captives. Although the ultimate measures to be taken remain indistinct, the underlying force of the "Rites of Seizure" is perhaps best conveyed by two strongly worded admonitions incorporated within the text. The procedure itself was considered to be so potentially treacherous that the utmost discretion is advised for anyone attempting to apply it. Those who take it upon themselves to engage in

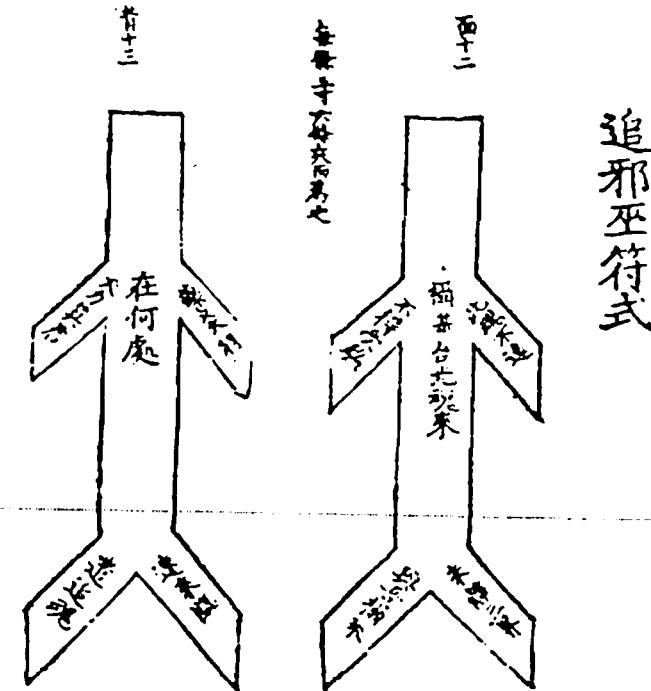


Figure 7.1. The "Rites for Seizing Perverse Sorcerers" require that multiple copies of the "Talisman for Pursuing Perverse Sorcerers" be rendered as illustrated. Inscriptions on front and back include the name of the sorcerer sought as well as the sorcerer's domicile. (*Tao-fa hui-yüan* [HY 1210], 264.6b)

the seizure and interrogation of sorcerers for personal reasons, moreover, are warned to expect the death penalty for their violation of the ritual code. Above all else, these advisories seem to reaffirm the inherent severity of the "Rites of Seizure." The instructions are a reminder, moreover, that exorcistic procedures both reinforced and were reinforced by all who served to maintain law and order in society. Black magic, as practiced by sorcerers such as Chang who confronted Magistrate Hung Pang-chih, had obviously met its match in more ways than one.

*Demolishing Shrines.* Guidelines on the destruction of shrines recorded in manuals on Thunder Rites prove to be slightly more far-ranging than those on eradicating sorcery itself. The two aims are not mutually exclusive. The abolition of practitioners of sorcery housed in shrines may be considered implicit, if not explicit, in the phrase *fa-miao ch'u-hsieh*

(destroy shrines and eradicate perversity). Wang Wen-ch'ing and Pai Yü-ch'an are among renowned experts in Thunder Rites to have used precisely these words in listing threats to be overcome.<sup>139</sup> A wide array of weapons became available for the accomplishment of this goal. Both the variety and creativeness exhibited by this new arsenal bespeak a markedly competitive era of Taoist exorcistic practice.

Among the most eye-catching instructions are those found in the manuals of Thunder Rites formulated in the name of the astral deity Ma Sheng. One text incorporated within the Ch'ing-wei corpus of the *Tao-fa hui-yüan* features an incantation describing his attributes and the force of his weapons. A three-headed, nine-eyed manifestation of Ma Sheng is to be envisioned mounted on a scarlet rhinoceros. "Fire-crows released in wrath set aberrant shrines ablaze; iron ropes brandished in glee entwine round mountain goblins," reads one couplet.<sup>140</sup> Variant formulations of the rites of Ma Sheng supplement this incantation with talismanic renditions of the weapons enumerated. A version of the "Fire-Crow Talisman" appears, for instance, in a *k'ao-chao* ritual code putatively transmitted by the Shen-hsiao codifier Lin Ling-su (1076-1120).<sup>141</sup> Each component is separately illustrated, together with the line of incantation to be recited upon inscription (figure 7.2). The recitation prescribed for producing the bird's head includes the lines "Flames of fire spewn from the mouth, scorching to death perverse forces."<sup>142</sup> But, rather than the fire-crow, it is Ma Sheng's steed, the fire-rhinoceros, that, according to this code, is the

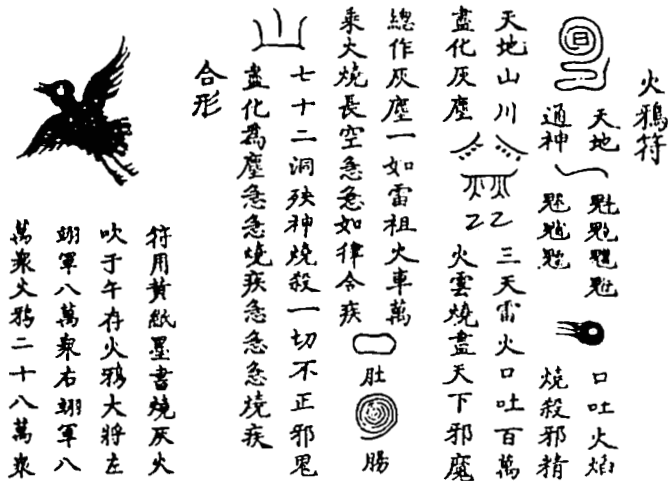


Figure 7.2. The flame-splitting fire-crow is among the weapons borne by the astral deity Ma Sheng. The instructions call for inscribing the "Fire-Crow Talisman" in black on yellow paper. (*Tao-fa hui-yüan* [HY 1210], 222.15b-16a)

weapon of choice against undesirable shrines. Lighting the abstract talismanic configuration representing this beast is said to provoke a clap of thunder that will immediately result in the conflagration of all shrines harboring injurious forces. A more complex vision of destruction is introduced in an alternative manual on the rites of Ma Sheng, the provenance of which is uncertain. The repression of shrines is among fourteen different applications specified for an inscription recorded in this manual under the title "Talisman for Remote Seizure" (*Yüan-cho fu*). Following its rendition on stone or on an iron tablet, one is to visualize Commander Ma standing inside the shrine targeted for destruction. It will burst into flames, according to these instructions, as one envisions the emergence of Ma Sheng's fire-wheel and fire-gourd, together with his fire-spitting snake.<sup>143</sup>

Strikingly similar images dominate a selection of Thunder Rites centering on the spirit of lightning, Teng Po-wen. Shrines and sorcerers alike, according to one manual, are deemed subject to the flames surging from the beak of the bird-headed Teng himself.<sup>144</sup> A single talismanic charge in the same text, moreover, evokes a stampede of fire-breathing animals, including everything from crows and hawks to camels, elephants, dragons, horses, lions, dogs, and even unicorns.<sup>145</sup> Another manual dedicated to Teng Po-wen features instructions specifically devised for overcoming "perverse shrines." A "Talisman for Sealing Shrines" (*Feng-miao fu*), imprinted with the Seal of Sire Thunder, is to be used in securing the gateways of offensive structures. The incantation to be recited as the gates are sealed implies that the shrine will thereby instantaneously collapse. But the actual demolition is understood to be accomplished with the aid of a complementary inscription, the "Talisman of the Fire-Wheel" (figure 7.3). The incantation recited for empowering this talisman evokes not only the spit-fire snake depicted but also a herd of celestial beasts spewing flames over great distances.<sup>146</sup> The guidelines governing its application, on the one hand, are pointedly ambiguous. Initially, one is instructed to envision someone else carrying forth the talisman. As the fire-wheel burns, the shrine itself, which is to be visualized as a grass hut, is described as succumbing to flaming chariots and conveyors of foul-smelling smoke. The closing comments, on the other hand, imply that a more active role than mere visualization is required. A memorial expression of gratitude is to be released, the text advises, prior to taking one's leave. "Do not look back once you come out of the shrine," reads the concluding admonition.<sup>147</sup>

Equally enigmatic instructions are recorded for applying a "Talisman of the Great Spirit of Crackling Fire." This talisman features a depiction of the bird-beaked Teng Po-wen soaring above a fire-breathing dragon (figure 7.4). It is recorded in a manual on Thunder Rites, which opens with a preface ascribed to Wang Wen-ch'ing.<sup>148</sup> Shrines housing spectral forces who delude the masses and steal their goods, among other crimes,

directive seems to suggest that although a shell may remain, the force of the talisman can be assumed to have reduced everything within to ashes. The procedure at any rate is considered to be so miraculous that, as the instructions conclude, one is forbidden to apply them except on rare occasions.

I would suggest that both the visual and auditory features of these instructions offer substantial clues regarding the weaponry behind Thunder Rites. The procedures in which fire-breathing animals are evoked appear fundamentally to culminate in a burst of flames. The talismans central to these rites, moreover, recall the fire-birds and fire-beasts that are known to have been employed in Chinese warfare since very early times. Illustrations of this primitive form of arms in the *Wu-ching tsung-yao*, dating to 1044, seem to attest to something more than a glancing similarity. Two types of fire-birds featured in this extraordinary handbook on martial arts, for example, are pictured banded with small receptacles of burning moxa tinder (figure 7.5).<sup>151</sup> These avian destroyers were sent by the dozens to fly over enemy encampments and granaries, setting them afire. So-called fire-beasts were similarly prepared for battle. Particularly evocative is an illustration in the *Wu-ching tsung-yao* depicting wild beasts bearing gourds of burning moxa tinder on top of their heads.<sup>152</sup> These illustrations bring to mind most immediately the fire-crows and fire-gourds depicted within Ma Sheng's arsenal. Fire-breathing snakes and dragons, not to mention exotic species such as rhinoceroses, camels, elephants, and unicorns, might best be regarded as the inspirations of minds well acquainted with the tradition of employing

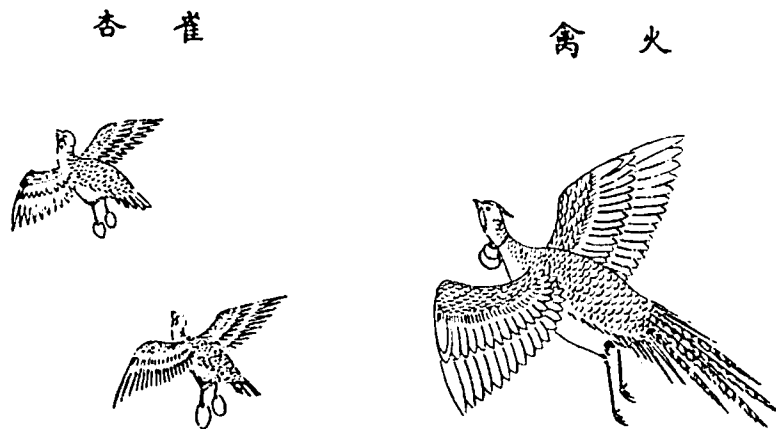


Figure 7.5. The pheasant and sparrows banded with nutfuls of burning moxa tinder, as depicted in the *Wu-ching tsung-yao*, find their correspondence in the fire-spitting crows and hawks featured in various manuals on Thunder Rites. (*Wu-ching tsung-yao* 11.21a-22b)

beasts of burden as weapons of war.<sup>153</sup> And like their counterparts on the battlefield, practitioners who called on flocks and herds of fire fighters by talisman and incantation may have been employing much the same weaponry. Talismanic renditions of fire-spitting birds and beasts, in short, would seem to be but shadows of the worldly species dispatched to set enemy shrines afire.

*New Weaponry.* On closer examination the manuals on Thunder Rites yield hints of weapons of far greater potency than incendiary devices had to offer. The evidence rests in not what the talismans depict but in what they were heard to deliver. Talismans of the fire-rhinoceros, crackling fire, and thunder-fire all gave way to claps of thunder. And within those rumblings is the key to a new form of weaponry behind Thunder Rites. Thunder Rites, in effect, gave new definition to the long-held perception that the greatest weapon of exorcism was command of the loudest noise.<sup>154</sup>

The narrative legacy of Thunder Rites is exemplified in Hung Mai's story of Sung An-kuo's defeat of an arboreal spirit. His rites of exorcism, it will be recalled, culminated in a clap of thunder that reduced the offending tree to cinders. Such anecdotes are found in a wide range of texts. Hagiographic accounts that feature the outbreak of thunderstorms on the release of a talisman may be considered a prototype of this genre.<sup>155</sup> But just as the legacy of rainmaking magic underlies this type, so too may its counterparts be considered the offspring of Thunder Ritual lore.

Stories centering on the destruction of perverse enshrinements are particularly common in hagiographies of figures who came to be adopted as patriarchs of various traditions of Thunder Rites. A late biography of the Ching-ming patriarch Hsü Sun, for example, finds him, much like Sung An-kuo, prevailing over a pernicious tree spirit.<sup>156</sup> Hsü reportedly witnessed villagers making offerings of flesh to a spirit who threatened dire consequences upon denial. He subsequently evoked wind and thunder to uproot its forest domain and declared the blackmailing perversity gone.

A significant variation on this theme is recorded in a story about another figure central to the Ching-ming heritage. Here the sound of thunder evoked by Hu Hui-ch'ao (d. 703) reduced a shrine to ashes.<sup>157</sup> Hu reportedly appeared in the Hsi shan region sometime around 674 or 675 and later oversaw the restoration of a temple there marking Hsü Sun's ascent. His victory over a nefarious spirit is reminiscent of the legend of Hsi-men Pao's confrontation with the god of the Yellow River. Hu Hui-ch'ao is portrayed as the salvation of a family whom he happened to encounter on a stroll through the marketplace of Hung-chou (Kiangsi). Their apparent bereavement caught his attention. He learned that they were grieving over their daughter's selection as the next bride of a local