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Investigating the history of folk Taoism: the concept of magic in the study of *zhuyou* rituals

Abstract

This article is devoted to the problem of applying the concept of magic in the study of Chinese Taoist pseudo-medical practices, particularly the therapeutic and apotropaic rituals of *zhuyou* 祝由, using incantations and talismans (fu 符). It addresses the question of whether, in the current state of sinological research, the use of the term "magic," which originated in Western culture, is still legitimate, and whether the phenomena in question meet the criteria for magicalness. This is an important issue because of the dissonance between the trends in contemporary theoretical research on magic, showing a tendency to interpret it as a parareligious phenomenon in which the concepts of religion and magic intermingle, and the practical approach of sinologists, who still clearly distinguish magical phenomena from religious phenomena and consistently use the term 'magic'. The article also attempts to answer the question of how classical definitions of magic should be modified to be consistent with the concept of magic actually used in sinological research.

Key words: History of folk Taoism; Taoist pseudo-medical rituals; magic in Chinese literature; definition of magic in sinological studies

The term magic/magical in sinological studies

In studies of Chinese medical literature, including that of the early period (from the Warring States period to the Six Dynasties period), some parareligious texts have been designated as 'magical'.² This is

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² I use the term 'parareligious' to denote phenomena in the field of religion, magic, divination, astrology, etc., based on beliefs in the existence of the supernatural world and assuming the operation of supernatural forces in people's lives.

especially true of pseudo-medical formulas documented as early as the Mawangdui 馬王堆 manuscripts from the 2nd century BC. Some of these formulas are related to *zhuyou* 祝由 healing practices, which are particularly well-known in the form developed after the 12th century, and especially between the 14th and 16th centuries, when they held the stature of an official branch of Chinese medicine. They consisted of practices based on Thunder rituals 五雷法, in which spells (*zhou* 咒) and talismans (*fu* 符) functioned as remedies, and the etiology of diseases was attributed to the activity of demons. The use of the term ‘magic’ in relation to such therapeutic and apotropaic practices is the main focus of this article.

The term ‘magic’ is currently used by scholars of Chinese medical literature, such as Paul Unschuld and Donald Harper (see e.g. Unschuld 2010; Harper 1998). It is also commonly used by scholars of religion and folklore, and particularly of rituals, such as Michael Strickmann, Philippe Cho, Florian Reiter, Christine Mollier, including those studying talismans (*fu*), such as Monika Drexler (see e.g. Strickmann 2002; Cho 2005; Reiter 2007; Mollier 2008; Drexler 1994). Sometimes the variant terms ‘demonic magic’ (see, for example, Yue 2014), ‘astral magic’ (Kotyk 2017)³ and ‘occult’ (Junqueira 2021) are also used. Besides, the use of the term ‘folk religion’ (synonymous with ‘popular religion’) as an equivalent of ‘magic’ should also be noted (see Hu 2012; Yang, Hu 2012).⁴

The term ‘magic’, derived from the conceptual apparatus of European ancient culture, reflects the concept of magical phenomena developed

³ In the case of the term ‘astral magic’, used by Jeffrey Kotyk, it should be noted that astrology is usually separated from magic. Regarding this term, Kotyk provides the following explanation: "We should note that a term approximating ‘astral magic’ is not found in Chinese. ‘Astral magic’ is a modern designation for the practice of magic as a means of interacting with or commanding the planets conceived of as gods or spirits. [...] For the purposes of this study, magic is understood as a practice of rituals aimed at unseen deities, in which one petitions, commands or deceives such beings for personal gain." (Kotyk 2017: 5).

⁴ These authors distinguish three varieties of folk religion, namely ‘communal’, ‘sectarian’ and ‘individual’. In this context, their characterization of the third variety, formulated with reference to contemporary Chinese society, is noteworthy: "For the most part, the individual type of folk religion is what classic scholars of religion would call ‘magic’ practices. In China, this type of folk religion beliefs and practices is the most pervasive. Some people may like to differentiate religion and magic on certain theological or philosophical basis, but the distinction becomes difficult, if possible at all, in the empirical study of folk religion. [] Following Weber, we treat the ‘magic’ practices as a kind of religious practice." (Yang, Hu 2012: 509–510.) Regarding the term ‘folk religion’ in Taoism, see also Stein 1979: 53–81.

in Western culture. As is well known, this circumstance has been raised in criticism of the research methods used to study magic in primitive and non-European cultures (i.e., not belonging to Western cultural circles). Although they are sometimes also used by Chinese researchers themselves,⁵ but as a rule, these scholars do not distinguish the conceptual category of magical phenomena. Instead, corresponding phenomena in Chinese culture are defined as *wugu* 巫蠱 ‘witchcraft’ and associated with the activities of shamans, *wu* 巫. This term has been primarily used to denote practices whose purpose was to do evil (defined as a type of malicious magic).⁶ These activities generally had the status of prohibited practices, but official legal classifications determined whether a given practice was included in this group.

Harper's study on the magical nature of early *zhuyou* healing practices

The problem of using the term ‘magic’ was raised by Donald Harper in his monograph *Early Chinese Medical Literature. The Mawangdui Medical manuscripts*, published in 1998 and based on his 1982 doctoral dissertation. Referring to early Chinese medical and occult literature

⁵ This is in reference to English-language publications (see, for example, Lei 2014).

⁶ Regarding the meaning of the term *wugu*, see Zhao 2013: 133–134: "When the character *wu* is combined with the character *gu* into *wugu*, the resulting compound word can serve as an umbrella term for various types of black magic popular in early and medieval China; it may also refer to a specific type of black magic that involves the maleficent use of poisonous insects made through *wu* sorcery and rituals, as is suggested by the use of character *gu*. In its earlier usage, however, *gu* more often than not referred to a type of black magic involving the use of human images in combination with the casting of spells and curses. The shift appears to have occurred during the Tang dynasty (618–907), when texts began to refer to this type of black magic as *yanmei* (lit., subduing demons or souls), and to use *gu* to designate the black magic of breeding and using poisonous insects and evil spirits, giving us the contemporary sense of the term *gu*. Thus, *wugu*, or *wugu*-sorcery, in its narrow sense, is synonymous with the word *gu*, or *gu*-sorcery, referring to either the making and using of human images or *gu*-poisons for evil purposes; in a broader sense, the term may refer to black magic in general; [] and in its most capacious sense, to both white and black magic." Cf. also Miura 2008: 116: "Taoism also drew a distinction between itself and some forms of magic and divination. For instance, in the **Laojun shuo yibai bashi jie* (The Hundred and Eighty Precepts Spoken by Lord Lao), Taoist masters are forbidden to associate themselves with *fengshui* 風水 ('wind and water,' i.e., geomancy), astrology, and other popular divination techniques. In addition, because of the importance it placed on ethics, Taoism did not participate in the practice of so-called 'evil' or 'perverse arts' (*yaoshu* 妖術, *xieshu* 邪術), or sorcery, to bring down sworn enemies."

evidenced in the Mawangdui manuscripts, Harper pointed out several important circumstances. Namely, that during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), pseudo-medical methods (classified as types of *zhuyou*) were used alongside medical practices in Chinese society. In other words, healing methods based on rituals using incantations were officially used alongside strictly medical practices employing pharmacological substances, etc. Their etiology was embedded in beliefs in the existence and actions of disease-causing demons.⁷ Harper refers to these methods as magical. It is worth noting that they were related to astrological and divination techniques that Chinese society of the time had adopted from shamanic culture. They gained the status of official medical techniques and were used widely, including by social elites (Harper 1998: 43, 61).⁸ The implication of Harper's claims is that the pseudo-medical practices with paramagic features used in Chinese society during the period he is considering were not forbidden or exclusive (operating outside or on the margins of the official religious and social mainstream).

When these healing methods were adopted by Taoists in the next period (i.e. the first centuries AD), they were linked doctrinally to Taoist theology.⁹ These methods, called *zhuyou* 祝由 (literally "to invoke the origin (of disease)" or "to remove the cause (of the disease)"), were considered a psychotherapeutic technique for "moving a person's essence (*jing*) and changing their *qi*".¹⁰

Harper put forward the thesis that during the period he studied, there was no dichotomy between magic and religion (or, as he writes, 'natural

⁷ Regarding the development of beliefs about disease-causing demons in the period between the Warring States and Six Dynasties, see Li 2009: 1103–1150. Li interprets the phenomenon of demons as metaphorical designations for health ailments caused by various factors and provides an outline of the formation of beliefs in this regard (cf. also Lagerwey 2011: 1–10).

⁸ See also Li 2009: 1106: "In the final years of the Eastern Han, the latent current of demonological etiology combined with the notion of wrongdoing in ancestor worship and resurfaced, while ritualistic medical techniques like *jinzhou* 禁咒 ('charms and curses') at the same time received the approval of physicians. As a result, they no longer occupied a peripheral corner in medicine, but were canonized and slightly later, systematized."

⁹ Cf. Harper 1987: 113: "The Warring States and Qin-Han periods witnessed the decline in prestige of these shamans, who came to be increasingly associated with witchcraft; the rise of occult specialists (*fangshi*, literally 'masters of recipes'), whose skills extended to magical operations; and the formation of a Daoist clergy, who adapted magic to fill the needs of the newly emergent religion (organized Daoist religious communities made their first appearance in the second century ce)."

¹⁰ See, for example, Lagerwey 2019: 44: "By contrast, medical classics like the *Huangdi neijing* 黄帝内经 (Yellow Emperor's inner classic) applied the theory of *qi* to create a new interpretation for the practice of *zhuyou*."

philosophy and occult thought') in Chinese society. Consistently, he proposed using the term 'magico-religious' for observed paramagic phenomena.¹¹ In other words, he assumed that magic and religion could not be separated or were difficult to separate in light of the texts he analyzed, especially 'recipe literature', and the social and religious context of their use for therapeutic purposes.¹² In doing so, he strongly questioned the validity of the concepts of magic put forward in the studies of evolutionists,¹³ in which magic and religion were seen as stages in the development of human culture. (Harper 1998: 149) Harper did not provide a definition of magic in Chinese culture in the context of his research, but nevertheless characterized it, stating that it refers to 'human actions undertaken in the belief that spirits and divine powers are present in nature,' and its distinguishing mark is 'incantations and ritual acts,' the use of which was 'to align oneself with divine powers'. (Harper 1998: 149–152) He explicitly attributed to magic both exorcist qualities and also a distinctive 'coercive effect' (means of influencing the supernatural world), thereby distinguishing it from religion. (Harper 1998: 149–150).

Zhuyou healing practices in the post-12th century period

On *zhuyou* practices in the later period, relatively little is known. Instead, they are well known from the period starting in the 12th century, when Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1100–1126) carried out a series of reforms and codification work within Chinese medicine. As a result, healing religious and paramagic rituals were incorporated into medical prac-

¹¹ See Harper 1998: 149: "A few basic observations are necessary. I assume the relation between religion and magic in Chinese antiquity; were it not stylistically cumbersome I would consistently use the compound forms 'magic and religion' and 'magico-religious.' Magic, whether from the perspective of ancient text sources or of modern investigation, concerned human actions undertaken in the belief that spirits and divine powers were present in nature. Having encountered particular circumstances, humans tapped the divine presence with voice, gesture, and select materials; likewise religion. Qualifications can be proposed, but it is difficult to justify the discreteness of religion except on relativistic grounds."; "Knowledge of demons and deities, incantations, rituals, and 'sundry magico-religious devices' became part of the occult knowledge dispersed in *fang-literature* like the Mawangdui medical manuscripts and the hemerological manuscripts from Shuihudi and Fangmatan."

¹² He refers to Phillips' article on the definition of magic in Greco-Roman culture (Phillips 1991: 260–276).

¹³ Regarding the history of research on the issue of magic, see, for example, Buchowski 1986; Meyer, Mirecki 2001; Mirecki, Meyer 2002.

tices.¹⁴ The consequence was a new ritual form of *zhuyou*, combining the idea of healing by unblocking the flow of *qi* with the idea of healing with exorcism rituals (*jin* 禁).¹⁵ The *zhuyou* healing ritual during this period was strongly linked to the figure of the Yellow Emperor, who was credited with its authorship. In short, the essence of the *zhuyou* treatment method was that sick people would turn to Taoist priests, who would make a diagnosis (identify the disease and the demon responsible) and then perform a ritual (i.e., a ritual associated with the Thunder deities). The priest would perform meditation and transform himself into a deity. Uttering incantations, he would write an appropriate talisman (*fu* 符), which symbolized a decree addressed to the executive deities of Thunder. He would burn the talisman (i.e. a decree ordering the elimination of demons), thus sending it to the executive deities. He further visualized himself transformed into a deity of Thunder, leading the subordinate deities in exterminating the demons of disease. The sick person then applied ashes from the talisman as medicine. Sometimes protective talismans were also written on the body or on pieces of paper. This ritual was performed for a fee.

Zhuyou healing practices between the 14th and 16th centuries were considered an official branch of medicine (they were one of the 13 state-recognized branches of Chinese medicine). They thus had a status analogous to that of the pseudo-medical rituals discussed by Harper during the Han Dynasty, known from the Mawangdui manuscripts. Then, in the second half of the 16th century, as a result of the efforts of enlightened circles representing conventional medicine and orthodox Taoism, who made the accusation that these were shamanistic methods,¹⁶ they lost their status as a medical method. Subsequently, *zhuyou* practices were clearly considered unorthodox practices, performed outside the official mainstream of Taoism and outside official medicine. They were merely tolerated as a paramagic and pseudo-medical method. As Unschuld and Zheng state:

During the Ming and Qing eras, it was gradually removed from orthodox medicine. Thus marginalized, its practice was restricted to folk use. Sorceresses and itinerant healers became the sole guardians of the tradition. (Unschuld, Zheng 2012: 902.)

¹⁴ On the codification of the rituals in this and subsequent periods, see Reiter 2014. For Emperor Huizong's medical reforms, see Goldschmidt 2006; Goldschmidt 2009: 20–22; 51–68, 180–188.

¹⁵ This term was rendered as 'interdiction' by Cho. It means exorcist and apotropaic practice. Cho notes its interchangeable occurrence with the term *zhu* 祝 (Cho 2005: 44).

¹⁶ Subsequently understood as 'heterodox or illegitimate' practices (Cho 2013: 80, footnote 18).

This shift in status was undoubtedly influenced by both political and civilizational factors, that is, the development of medical science in China and the spread of knowledge globally in general (a manifestation of the process of eliminating or ‘disenchanted magic’) (Weber 1992: 61–62; Buchowski 1986: 49–50. See also Hu 2012: 42–46). In turn, the fundamental factor determining the persistence of *zhuyou* practices was certainly the strength of tradition.¹⁷

Observations on Harper's interpretation of the *zhuyou* phenomenon

Referring to Harper’s theses and attempting to answer the question of whether the pseudo-medical practices under consideration – on the basis of the current state of knowledge about their functioning throughout history – should be classified as magical acts, as most researchers do, or as magico-religious (in accordance with Harper’s postulate, which, however, evidently went unheeded), I would like to make a few observations. First and foremost, one has to agree with Harper that the definitions of magical phenomena formulated in the 20th century and the criteria proposed for their classification (such as those of Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 2005: 39–41), Max Weber (Weber 1965: 20–31), and William J. Goode (Goode 1964: 50–55)) are only of limited applicability in reference to the magical nature of the practices recorded in the *zhuyou* texts. This is primarily due to the special circumstances involved in incorporating *zhuyou* practices into official medicine (this occurred during the reign of the foreign, Mongolian Yuan dynasty) and, subsequently, their unique status in the formal cult of the time. Consequently, these pseudo-medical practices clearly do not meet some of the basic ‘classical’ criteria of magic, such as functioning outside or on the margins of orthodox religious worship, the separation of the functions of priest and magician, or the absence of specialized doctrinal knowledge. At the same time, however, they meet others that seem particularly relevant as markers of magical characteristics, such as being embedded in beliefs in the existence of a supernatural world and its interaction with the earthly world, being instrumental and manipulative, operating from pragmatic and utilitarian motives, and so on.

¹⁷ Its special importance was emphasized by Bronislaw Malinowski in his studies of magic (Malinowski 1948: 55–57).

Suggestion for a pragmatic interpretation

How to interpret this phenomenon? This can certainly be done in different ways, using different theoretical approaches, different assumptions and evaluation criteria, and reaching different conclusions. For practical reasons, however, given the current methodological approach in sinological research to the phenomenon of "magic," a pragmatic solution that would justify and legitimize the existing consensus seems desirable, at least as one of the acceptable options. Otherwise, it would have to be assumed that perhaps we are dealing with a methodological misclassification of religious and magical phenomena. The idea is to have such a solution that would at the same time be consistent with the approach to the problem of magic in the research of other Oriental cultures and religions representing a similar level of civilizational development. For this reason, it is worth referring here to the relatively advanced research on Jewish magic in medieval and modern Judaism, where apparently such a solution was found. I am specifically referring to the case of the Kabbalistic communities (see Bohak 2015: 268–299, 711–719), where we are dealing with the functioning of therapeutic and apotropaic magic (strongly linked to the doctrine of Judaism) within religious organizational structures. How was the phenomenon of magic interpreted in this case, which clearly shows significant parallels with the case of *zhuyou* practices? It turns out that researchers of Jewish magic who faced a similar problem tended to formulate a minimalist definition of it. The conclusive criterion in it is the belief (and practices based on it) in the existence of the supernatural world and the possibility of producing irrational effects in the earthly world with its help. This is well illustrated by the following statements on the definition of Jewish magic by Moshe Idel and Gideon Bohak:

By Jewish magic I mean a system of practices and beliefs that implies the possibility of material gain through techniques that cannot be explained experimentally; these themes are part of Jewish traditions that were understood to be handed down and as relying on the authority or experimentation of others (Idel 1997: 195);

the definition of magic as a set of beliefs and practices whose purpose is to alter reality through means that escape scientific explanation, or any similarly intuitive definition of magic. (Bohak 2008: 63)

At the same time, they abstract other normative criteria previously used in defining magic.

As can be seen from the above, the study of Jewish magic has developed a definition (or definitions) of magic that has the advantage of

being pragmatic. Arguably, it can be applied universally and gives researchers the freedom to identify, classify and distinguish between religious and magical phenomena, even if their nature is complex, non-obvious. It is a non-rigorous and open-ended definition. It is decidedly minimalist, applying only a few basic classification criteria. Such a concept of definition was adopted arbitrarily by leading Jewish magic researchers evidently for practical reasons arising from the specifics of the phenomena under study. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly an acceptable and functioning concept of definition in the circles of Jewish magic researchers (though certainly not the only one).

If such a definition is applied by analogy to *zhuyou* rituals, it seems indisputable that these practices meet the criterion of magicalness. Thus, their magical character is expressed in their function, which is to achieve specific therapeutic goals by means of verbal-gestural acts and other ritual acts and ritual objects that are irrational and unrealistic in light of current knowledge. In this regard, it is irrelevant that they do not clearly demonstrate a stigma of heterodoxy, exclusivity and condemnation (at least in some periods). In addition, it should be emphasized that the indicated practices, which are intended to perform explicitly therapeutic and apotropaic functions, are directed at curing diseases and protecting against illnesses and misfortunes. They do not exhibit the characteristics of malicious magic. Doctrinally, they are based on belief in the existence of demons, understood as harmful spiritual entities that cause disease, as well as deities and other good spiritual beings that fight demons, coming to people's aid. Their distinguishing feature, moreover, is belief in the existence of esoteric knowledge about the possibility of contacting the supernatural world and the mechanisms used to achieve therapeutic goals. While they may operate within the framework of an official, regular religious cult and have strong ties to Taoist theology, they meet most of the other potential classification requirements for magical phenomena, such as the service nature of the practice, among others.

It should be noted here, of course, that *zhuyou* practices in the period from the 14th to the 16th century, when they were recognized as an official medical method, have clear theurgical characteristics. This is well demonstrated by the founding myth, known under the English name (among other names) "The Yellow Emperor's Manual".¹⁸ The text of the myth states that the ritual healing practice of *zhuyou* was granted to people by one of the highest Taoist deities – the Yellow Emperor. The Yellow Emperor was said to have given the people both talismans (*fu*) and incantations, as well as the principles of healing through *zhuyou* rituals.

¹⁸ This text probably dates from the 15th century (Cho 2005).

In making the interpretation, it is certainly necessary to take special account of the fact that the status of the *zhuyou* ritual changed from period to period. While in the period between the 14th and 16th centuries it had the rank of a medical practice belonging to the canon of medical science and at the same time the status of a recognized ritual practice in official Taoism, in the later period its position was severely downgraded, to the status of a folk practice. Nevertheless, it functioned within Taoism in this later period as well, although undoubtedly on its margins, mainly in its folk variety. A characteristic feature of this ritual in both phases is its service character, the belief in the existence of demons, the belief in the possibility of emergency interventions by deities with the power to perform supernatural acts (miracles).

In light of the cited premises, various approaches to interpreting the *zhuyou* ritual in terms of its magicality seem undoubtedly acceptable, both considering it a parareligious phenomenon and a magical or paramagic one. There are logical arguments for each of these interpretations.

Conclusion: proposal for a minimalist definition of magic

I believe that the circumstances outlined above can be considered convincing arguments to justify the use of the terms "magic" in relation to Taoist pseudo-medical writings and the rituals attested to in them. In line with this concept, the following minimalist definition of Taoist magic (in terms of healing and apotopathic practices) can be tentatively proposed:

It is a system of practices and beliefs that presupposes the possibility to achieve specific goals related to healing and protection through irrational techniques that have no justification in the light of scientific knowledge. The determinant of such magical practices, in addition to belief in the existence of a supernatural world and its interactions with the earthly world, and in particular the belief in the existence and action of malevolent demons, is the use of spells and/or talismans. The utilitarian and fee-based nature of these practices is also a distinctive feature.

Importantly, this definition seems to justify the existing consensus among most researchers who use the concept of magic in the study of Taoist rituals. Of course, we must agree with Harper and other researchers who emphasize that magical and religious phenomena often intermingle and their distinction is not always possible. It is certainly acceptable to approach the rituals under discussion as a phenomenon within the framework of religion, rather than outside and in opposition to it, that is, as a parareligious phenomenon.

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Z badań nad historią ludowego taoizmu: koncepcja magii w studiach nad rytuałami *zhuyou*

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest problemowi stosowania pojęcia magii w badaniach chińskich taoistycznych praktyk pseudomedycznych, w szczególności terapeutycznych i apotropaicznych rytuałów *zhuyou* 祝由, wykorzystujących zaklęcia i talizmany (*fu* 符). Autor wypowiada się w kwestii, czy stosowanie w badaniach sinologicznych terminu 'magia', pochodzącego z kultury zachodniej, jest w obecnym stanie badań ciągle zasadne i czy odnośne zjawiska spełniają kryteria magiczności. Jest to problem istotny ze względu na dysonans pomiędzy trendami we współczesnych badaniach teoretycznych nad magią, wykazującymi tendencję do intepretowania jej jako zjawiska parareligijnego, w którym pojęcia religii i magii przenikają się, a praktycznym podejściem sinologów, którzy ciągle wyraźnie odróżniają zjawiska magiczne od zjawisk religijnych i konsekwentnie posługują się terminem 'magia'. W artykuł podjęto też próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, jak powinno się zmodyfikować klasyczne definicje magii, by były spójne z pojęciem magii faktycznie stosowanym w badaniach sinologicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: historia ludowego taoizmu; taoistyczne rytuały pseudomedyczne; magia w literaturze chińskiej; definicja magii w badaniach taoistycznych