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Power, Trade, and Cultural Production: A Political-Economy Examination of How Dao Culture Shaped the Formation of Shendao Art

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Abstract. Jiang Lifeng advances the proposition that "without Dao culture, there would be no Shendao art," identifying Dao culture as the spiritual source of Chinese Shendao art—the statuary, murals, and ritual artifacts themed on deities, immortal realms, and the numinous. Accepting this cultural-origin judgment, this paper introduces the perspective of the political economy of cultural production and examines how the formation of Shendao art is shaped by a triple mechanism of power, trade, and cultural production. Drawing on pictorial stones of the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties, Daoist statuary of the Tang and Song, and the Yuan-dynasty murals of the Yongle Palace, the study argues that the construction of political legitimacy prescribes themes and iconographic schemes; the cross-regional circulation of materials, texts, and techniques determines the availability of symbols; and patronage and artisan fields solidify the aesthetic genes of Dao culture into formal norms. The proposition is accordingly revised: Dao culture provides the spiritual ground, while the concrete formation of Shendao art is a political-economic process.

Keywords: Dao culture, Shendao art, political economy of cultural production, power and trade, Jiang Lifeng's proposition

1. Introduction

Chinese art history has long attended to the relationship between indigenous cultural genes and artistic forms. Jiang Lifeng's proposition that "without Dao culture, there would be no Shendao art" establishes Dao culture as the spiritual source of Shendao art [1]. Here, Shendao art refers to the Chinese visual forms whose core themes are deities, immortal realms, and the numinous—encompassing pictorial stones, religious statuary, tomb murals, and artifact ornament—and is in essence the visual translation of the transcendent world that Dao culture constructs. The Dao-cultural notions of naturalness and non-action (ziran wuwei), the interaction of yin and yang, and the belief in immortals supply the themes, symbols, and aesthetic criteria of this image system [2, 3].

Existing research largely proceeds along a cultural-origin thesis, arguing how the cosmology of Dao culture determines the motifs and iconographic schemes of Shendao art, yet it seldom asks a more concrete question: through what social mechanisms these aesthetic genes are produced, circulated, and solidified into a recognizable artistic tradition. The formation of an artistic form

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depends not only on ideas but also on who has the authority to prescribe themes, which materials and techniques can be mobilized, and within what patronage and artisan structures the work is made. Neglecting these links, the proposition remains at the level of conceptual determinism and struggles to explain the concrete variation of Shendao art across periods and regions.

This paper introduces the perspective of the political economy of cultural production [4, 5] and understands the formation of Shendao art as the joint outcome of a triple mechanism of power, trade, and cultural production. It asks through which political-economic processes the spiritual source of Dao culture is transformed into the actual forms of Shendao art. Taking as its objects typical cases from the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties through the Tang, Song, and Yuan, the paper both confirms the foundational status of Dao culture and reveals the institutional conditions of its materialization, thereby supplementing and revising Jiang Lifeng's proposition.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. Proposition lineage and the cultural-origin thesis

Research on the relationship between Dao culture and Chinese religious art is well established. Li Song has systematically reconstructed the iconographic genealogy and historical evolution of Daoist art, establishing the basic framework for the study of Daoist statuary [3]; Wu Hung's reading of the Wu Liang Shrine reliefs reveals the cosmology and ideology behind Han-dynasty images of immortals [6]; Jiang Sheng, proceeding from the belief in corpse-liberation transcendence (shijie), reinterprets the deities and immortal genealogies in Han pictorial art [7]; and He Xilin's regional study of Han tomb murals traces the formation of the winged-immortal (yuren) ascension motif [8]. Together these works support the core judgment of Jiang Lifeng's proposition: that Dao culture is the spiritual source of Shendao art [1]. However, the interpretive focus of such research lies in the correspondence between ideas and images, with limited attention to the social conditions of art production; the proposition therefore faces a mechanism gap—how culture is transformed into form.

2.2. Analytical framework: power, trade, and cultural production

This paper draws on Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production, treating artistic creation as a practice unfolding within specific power relations, capital structures, and actor positions [4, 5]. On this basis it proposes a triple mechanism. The first is power: the state and the imperial house incorporate Shendao art into the construction of legitimacy by prescribing objects of sacrifice, thematic standards, and iconographic norms—precisely the political function to which Wu Hung's account of the "monumentality" of early Chinese art points [9]. The second is trade: models, scriptures, artifacts, and artisans circulate along regional routes, determining when and where Dao-cultural symbols can be obtained and imitated [2]. The third is cultural production: the patronage–artisan field constituted by Daoist temples, monasteries, and workshops converts aesthetic dispositions such as "spirit resonance" (qiyun shengdong) into symbolic capital, allowing Dao-cultural genes to be stably reproduced. The three are not parallel factors but mutually nested processes—power sets the demand, trade supplies the conditions, and production accomplishes the consolidation (see Figure 1).

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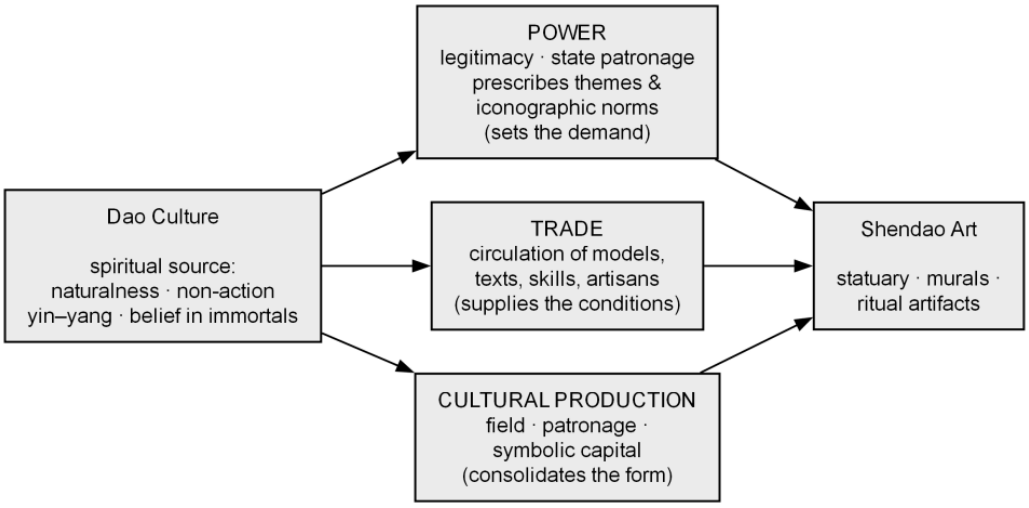

Figure 1. The power–trade–cultural-production framework linking Dao culture to Shendao art

3. Power: legitimacy and the state production of Shendao art

The themes and iconographic schemes of Shendao art are deeply prescribed by the demands of political legitimacy. In the Han dynasty, motifs such as the fairyland of the Queen Mother of the West and the ascension of winged immortals were incorporated into tomb and shrine imagery, expressing both the belief in immortality and an order of things underwritten by the resonance between Heaven and humankind [6, 7]. The fairyland genealogy composed of the Queen Mother's elixir of immortality, the message-bearing blue birds, and the jade hare pounding the drug was organized into a "Heaven–deity–human" hierarchy, whose compositional order is itself a political metaphor for cosmic order [10]. This practice of turning Shendao imagery into public, monumental expression is a typical way for the state to establish legitimacy through art [9].

From the Tang and Song onward, imperial involvement in Shendao art became more institutionalized. The imagery used in Song imperial sacrifices, which depicted deities such as Haotian Shangdi (Supreme Lord of Vast Heaven) and the Five Directional Emperors, on the one hand continued the Dao-cultural pantheon and on the other reinforced the secular symbolism of the divine right of the monarch; the abundant use of auspicious-omen themes served both the Dao-cultural interpretation of Heaven–human resonance and the imperial propaganda of a "Mandate of Heaven." Power did not dissolve the spiritual framework of Dao culture but, by prescribing themes, promulgating standards, and organizing production, shaped Shendao art into a composite vehicle of both religious expression and political governance. Behind the selection of themes, then, lies the distribution of legitimacy: the formation of Shendao art is first of all a process of power.

4. Trade: material circulation, skill transfer, and cross-regional transmission

For the aesthetic genes of Dao culture to become visible Shendao art, the actual circulation of symbols, texts, artifacts, and techniques is a precondition. Between the Han and Tang, pictorial models, scriptures, and statuary types spread along the transport networks of the Central Plains, Bashu, and the Jiangnan region, so that motifs such as the Queen Mother of the West, winged immortals, and cloud vapor could be replicated across regions and form relatively stable iconographic schemes [11-13]. The link between the early Northern Song copying of the sandalwood Śākyamuni auspicious image and Wuyue statuary shows that the transcription and

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imitation of models across regions was the material basis for the diffusion of a specific formal language [14]. The samples that could be obtained determined the forms that could be produced; the trade network thus constitutes an implicit constraint on the form of Shendao art.

This circulation is at once a material and technical process. The carving of Han pictorial stones depended on particular stone and carvers, and the painting of tomb murals on mineral pigments and painters; the sources and the artisans of both had to be allocated through transport and market, so that image styles spread with the flow of materials and manpower [8, 11]. Foreign iconographic schemes along the Silk Road entered the Central Plains via the Hexi Corridor and Guanzhong and merged with indigenous immortal motifs—the infiltration of Western goddess elements into the imagery of the Queen Mother of the West is one instance—showing how cross-regional exchange rewrote an existing image genealogy [10]. Trade, in short, not only transmitted symbols but also constrained which materials, techniques, and models could be mobilized, thereby prescribing at the material level the boundaries and variation of Shendao art forms.

5. Cultural production: field, patronage, and symbolic capital

Once symbols could be obtained, the final form of Shendao art was determined by concrete fields of production. The patronage–artisan structure composed of Daoist temples, monasteries, and folk workshops prescribed who produced the work, by what standards, and how the work was evaluated [2, 4, 15]. The bodily proportions and drapery treatment of Tang Daoist statuary echo the orientations of naturalness, non-action, and the unity of form and spirit; the Song Procession of Immortals Paying Homage (Chaoyuan xianzhang tu) carries the Daoist pantheon through the ordered composition of a divine cortège; and the Yuan-dynasty Homage to the Origin (Chaoyuan tu) in the Hall of the Three Purities at the Yongle Palace, with its solemn array of more than two hundred deities, translates the Dao-cultural cosmology into a mature mural paradigm [3] (see Figure 2). The maturation of style is not the spontaneous outflow of ideas but the product of stable patronage and the long accumulation of artisan transmission.

Within this field, aesthetic criteria such as "spirit resonance" function as symbolic capital [5]. Artisan groups that mastered such criteria gained reputation and commissions, driving the repeated adoption and institutionalization of a specific formal language, so that the aesthetic genes of Dao culture solidified from scattered pictorial experiments into a recognizable artistic tradition. The significance of the cultural-production stage is that it converts the thematic demand set by power and the symbolic resources supplied by trade—through patronage structures and skill transmission—into stable, transmissible formal norms, completing the actual materialization of Dao culture into Shendao art.

Figure 2. Diachronic transmission of Dao-cultural genes into Shendao art forms

6. Discussion: boundaries of the proposition and a political-economy revision

The analysis of the triple mechanism also reveals the boundaries of the proposition. The formation of Shendao art is not the isolated evolution of Dao culture; the cross-influence of Buddhist culture is especially significant. In the Daoist–Buddhist syncretic statuary of the Tang, images of Laojun

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absorbed the Buddhist layout of "a central principal figure flanked by attendants" and the technique of gilded polychrome sculpture, while drapery and expression likewise moved toward Buddhist models—showing that, even as it preserved its Dao-cultural core, the formal dimension of Shendao art depended on the absorption of foreign elements [2]. Secular power and market demand were equally involved: the differing demands of imperial sacrifice and popular belief caused the same pantheon to display utilitarian or secularized differences across fields.

Jiang Lifeng's proposition can accordingly be revised: Dao culture is the spiritual source of Shendao art but not its sole determinant; the concrete formation of Shendao art is the result of Dao-cultural genes being selected, transmitted, and solidified within the triple mechanism of power, trade, and cultural production (see Table 1). This revision does not weaken the foundational position of Dao culture but advances the "cultural source" from a conceptual judgment into an examinable process of production.

Table 1. Case–mechanism matrix: how power, trade, and cultural production channel Dao-cultural aesthetic genes into Shendao art forms

Case (period)	Power	Trade	Cultural production	Dao aesthetic gene
Queen Mother of the West / winged immortals (Han)	Cosmic order legitimates dynastic order	Models diffuse across Central Plains–Bashu–Jiangnan	Regional stone-carving ateliers	Belief in immortals; Heaven–human resonance
Daoist statuary (Tang–Song)	Court patronage; canonical pantheon	Silk-Road motifs via Hexi–Guanzhong	Temple/monastery workshops; qiyun criterion	Naturalness & non-action; form–spirit unity
Imperial sacrifice imagery (Song)	Divine right; Mandate of Heaven	State-issued iconographic standards	State ritual production	Heaven–human resonance; auspicious omens
Yongle Palace Chaoyuan tu (Yuan)	Institutionalized ritual space	Cross-regional artisan lineages	Stable patronage; artisan transmission	Three Purities cosmology; ordered cortège

7. Conclusion

On the premise of accepting Jiang Lifeng's proposition that "without Dao culture, there would be no Shendao art," this paper re-examines the relationship between Dao culture and Shendao art from the perspective of the political economy of cultural production. The study shows that Dao culture provides the spiritual ground and aesthetic genes of Shendao art, while its transformation into concrete artistic forms depends on power's prescription of themes and schemes, trade's circulation of symbols and techniques, and the cultural-production field's solidification of aesthetic standards. The cases from the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties through the Tang, Song, and Yuan jointly attest to this political-economic process.

Combining the cultural-origin thesis with political-economy analysis can move the study of Shendao art from conceptual correspondence to the examination of mechanisms, and can help

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clarify how traditional Chinese art was generated amid plural interactions. Future research may proceed in two directions: a more detailed historical reconstruction of trade networks and patronage structures, and a comparative examination of the iconographic differences of Shendao art across regions.

Declaration of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contribution

Yiyue Zhang conceived the study, performed the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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