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Searching for the Location of Lord Lao: The Evolution of Daoist Cosmic Concept between the Han and Tang Dynasties

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Abstract: The period between the Han and Tang dynasties was a crucial time in the development of the Daoist cosmic concept. During that time, Daoist believers needed to place important deities properly in the newly created heavenly realm. Faced with placing the great deity Lord Lao in a specific place, different Daoist believers made various attempts with some complex adjustments, which eventually reached the consensus during the Tang Dynasty at the latest that “Lord Lao lives in Great Clarity Heaven”. The investigation of this adjustment process would present multiple possibilities in the development of the Daoist cosmic concept.

Keywords: great high lord Lao; cosmic concept; Kunlun mountain; great clarity heaven; supreme pole heaven; purple sublimity palace



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In 570, Zhen Luan 甄鸞 (fl. 566–570) objected to Emperor Wu (Yuwen Yong 宇文邕, re. 560–578) of the Northern Zhou Dynasty's (557–581) flattering of Daoism and submitted the *Xiaodao Lun* 笑道論 (*Laughing at the Dao*) to refute Daoist teachings. In this work, which enraged Emperor Wu, Zhen Luan acerbically sneered at the inherent contradictions of the Daoist cosmic concept. In Chapter 1 of his work titled “The Creation of Heaven and Earth 造立天地”, Zhen Luan quoted the Daoist classic *Zao tiandi Ji* 造天地記 (*the Record of Creating Heaven and Earth*)—“Kunlun Mountain is 4800 li high, and above it are Jade Capital Mountain 玉京山 and Grand Canopy Mountain 大羅山, each 4800 li high”. He also quoted Daoist the source named *Guangshuo Pin* 廣說品 (*the chapter of General Exposition*): “The distance between the heaven and earth is one hundred million and five thousands of li, and the Purple Sublimity Palace 紫微宮 is located in the heaven that is five hundred million levels above”. Then, Zhen Luan ranked the Daoist doctrine of Lord Lao's body transforming into the universe with the above-mentioned hierarchy of heavenly realms in which the Kunlun and Purple Sublimity Palace were located, and then came to the following absurd conclusion:

The Purple Sublimity Palace is situated millions of li higher than Mount Kunlun. And Lord Lao transformed his heart into the canopy, his liver into the Palace of the Green Emperor, his spleen into the Purple Sublimity Palace, and his head into Mount Kunlun. Why does Lord Lao stand upside down on the ground with his head below and his liver above? (紫微宮) 是則高於崑崙山數百萬里。而老君以心為華蓋, 肝為青帝宮, 脾為紫微宮, 頭為崑崙山。不知老君何罪倒豎於地, 頭在下、肝在上? (Zhen 1934).

In Zhen Luan's misinterpretation of the Daoist universe, the Purple Sublimity Palace (Lord Lao's spleen) was located at the upper level, while Mount Kunlun (Lord Lao's head) was much lower. This upside-down form was indeed absurd. Zhen Luan's barb pointed to the absurdities in the Daoist cosmic concept and view of heaven, and Lord Lao (deified Laozi) became the object of ridicule. Just underneath Zhen Luan's seemingly superficial satire lay complex issues of Daoist philosophy and intellectual history.

The period between the Han (206 BC–220 CE) and Tang (618–907) was one of the most enthusiastic periods in the evolution of Daoist teachings. Different Daoist groups in different regions created their own “scriptural teaching 經教” systems based on the old beliefs

and ideological resources. With the deepening of knowledge exchanges during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589), the originally diverse doctrinal ideas were largely integrated by the early Tang (618–907), which solidified into an internal consensus among Daoists. During this period, the Daoist cosmic concept experienced a process of consolidation from much diversiform content into an ideological unity.¹ It is noteworthy that Daoism, in creating its cosmic concept (especially the description of the heavenly realm), needed not only to elaborate on the appearance of “nature” and the process of its creation but also to rationalize the placement of exalted deities in the cosmic levels and attempt to account for the relationship between the deities and the universe. As a result, the “parameters” considered by Daoists while creating or describing their cosmic concept were much increased. Unsurprisingly, this caused difficult contradictions in the integration and harmonization of Daoist cosmologies from different sources. When Zhen Luan mocked the Daoist doctrine of Lord Lao incarnating the universe, it was during a period in which multiple Daoist cosmologies coexisted and had not yet been fully integrated. In fact, the contradictions between different Daoist texts offering descriptions of the universe were much more serious than in Zhen Luan’s example. Under the background of the fierce debate between Buddhism and Daoism, such inherent doctrinal contradictions would inevitably become the focus of attack by ideological competitors. Furthermore, Zhen Luan also challenged the description of the cosmic hierarchy inhabited by another Daoist deity, the Lord of Great Dao of the Most High 太上大道君². In a similar way to the mockery of Lord Lao’s upside-down position, Zhen Luan’s criticism continued to be based on a method of false attribution. Zhen Luan and others had successively openly questioned and sharply refuted Daoist cosmological views and the location of the deities, which may indeed have shaken the foundation of the Daoist faith. Facing the introduction of the highly inclusive and explanatory Buddhist cosmic concept to China, such a provocation would undoubtedly have increased the anxiety of the Daoists. Thus, with the internal challenges and stimulation from outside, did the Daoists try to adjust their teachings and solve their conceptual contradictions? If the answer was yes, then how did they solve these problems? And did it ultimately work? Concerning these questions, the process of how medieval Daoists conceptually placed Lord Lao in the celestial realms is of vital importance in exploring the process of adaptation and integration of Daoist cosmologies at that time.

1. Shadows of the Kunlun Mountain as the Heavenly Ladder

The transformation of Laozi (human) to “(Great high) Lord Lao” (deity) was already completed in the Han Dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Huan (re. 147–167), Wang Fu’s 王阜 “Laozi Shengmu Bei” 老子聖母碑 (Epitaph of Laozi’s Holy Mother) and Bian Shao’s 邊韶 “Laozi Ming” 老子銘 (Inscription of Laozi) both described Laozi as “the Dao, born from the formless in the beginning, arose before the Great Origin, and moves in the source of the Primal Simplicity 道也, 乃生於無形之先, 起於太初之前, 行於太素之元” (F. Wang 1960). He is “merging the Qi of chaos, together with the Three Lights forever 離合於混沌之氣, 與三光為始終” (Bian 1988). The above statements are already familiar. The large number of Lord Lao images discovered in the Han Dynasty tombs repeatedly prove that Laozi had been revered as a deity (Jiang 2016, pp. 438–516, 139–57), but still there were distinct understandings of his divinity from different communities (M. Lu 2021). Scholars have conducted extensive research on the initial process of Laozi’s deification. Liu Yi has provided a comprehensive review of this topic.³ The continuous deification of Laozi gradually led to the assimilation of his divinity with the Dao. Meanwhile, as an independent and distinct deity, Laozi, or Lord Lao⁴, maintained a stable position in the world of belief and occupied an exclusive “residence”. Lord Lao’s legends and deification had multiple sources and clues. One of these clues suggests that there was a significant connection between Lord Lao and the Kunlun Mountain. This connection led to Lord Lao’s residence being placed on Kunlun by the early Heavenly Master of Daoism. Such an arrangement left a lasting impact on the subsequent legends of Lord Lao.

According to ancient Chinese legends, Kunlun stands amid heaven and earth and was one of the most important sacred mountains in ancient Chinese beliefs. From ancient times to the present, the cultural and spiritual value of Kunlun has been reiterated and reconstructed countless times. Early Daoism made every effort to incorporate and utilize the Kunlun faith, and Kunlun was naturally accepted as one of the most important fairylands in Daoism⁵. In the famous early Daoist classic *Laozi Xiang'er Zhu* 老子想爾注 (*Xiang'er Commentary to Laozi*), the dwelling of Lord Lao was placed on the Kunlun Mountain: "When scattered, he becomes the Qi, and when gathered, he becomes the Most High Lord Lao who constantly governs Kunlun 一散形為氣, 聚形為太上老君, 常治崑崙" (Rao 1991). Jiang Sheng's 姜生 research based on Han Dynasty tombstone carvings and later literary materials suggests that there existed an immortal ascension belief during the Han Dynasty. According to this belief, people would "worship Lord Lao to 'receive books' and visit the Queen Mother of the West at the 'Kunlun Gate' 崑崙闕" (Jiang 2016). The close connection between the Queen Mother of the West and Kunlun Mountain, being one of the most familiar themes belonging to Chinese mythological research, had also been incorporated into Daoist beliefs and descriptions of the immortal realms⁶. Although there is no clear evidence to locate the place where Laozi granted the Daoist books on the Kunlun Mountain, the process of ascension through receiving the book from Lord Lao and paying respects to the Queen Mother of the West had made the "geographical relationship" between Lord Lao and Kunlun quite close. And in turn, this may have led later Daoist believers to suppose that Lord Lao's residence was close to or even on Kunlun (as described in the *Xiang'er Zhu*).

As the axis mundi in ancient Chinese mythology, Kunlun holds an extremely important position in the Chinese belief system. Throughout the existing research on Kunlun, it can be found that traditional academic research on the topic often attempted to determine the exact location of Mount Kunlun by examining the descriptions in pre-Qin literature such as the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) and the *Chu Ci* 楚辭 (*the Songs of the South*). However, most modern studies show that the attempt to locate mythical elements in a specific earthly location runs too high a risk. Instead, exploring the origins and evolution of Kunlun in the fields of mythology, intellectual history, cosmology, and linguistics may yield more tangible results. Notably, Gu Jiegang's "Kunlun Mythology System" proposed a new direction for Kunlun research (Gu 2000). Since then, scholars have further explored Kunlun in terms of ideology and beliefs, achieving numerous meaningful fruits⁷. The mythical significance of Kunlun need not be extensively explained here, but as Wang Yu pointed out, according to the *Shanhai jing* and other documents before the Eastern Han Dynasty, other mountains besides Kunlun also served as the gateways to heaven, residences of the celestial sovereign, and the axis of the world (Y. Wang 2021, pp. 76–83). The elevation of Kunlun's status and exclusive possession of these functions gradually solidified during the Han Dynasty, and these concepts were precisely the cultural heritage that organized Daoism was able to directly accept.

Several scholars have discussed how early Daoism absorbed and transformed the Kunlun legends (Luo 2014, pp. 149–54; 2020, pp. 66–74; Zhang and Li 2020, pp. 203–30; G. Wang 2022, pp. 165–72). In the process of transforming the Kunlun Mountain into a Daoist fairyland, Daoists were particularly attentive to shaping the depiction of the Queen Mother of the West and her female fairy group⁸. According to literary and archaeological materials, the relationship between the Queen Mother of the West and the Kunlun Mountain was established no later than the Han Dynasty, and it remained stable in the subsequent Daoist descriptions of the universe. Although Laozi, or Lord Lao, was given a residence on the Kunlun Mountain in *Xiang'er Zhu*, this view did not become the mainstream understanding of the Daoist cosmic concept after the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The lack of documented descriptions and the concealment by the later mainstream cosmic concept have led to the neglect of this residence of Lord Lao in early Daoism. Luo Yiying and Wang Guiping have introduced the descriptions of Lord Lao residing in the Kunlun Mountain in *Xiang'er Zhu* and *Baopuzi-Quhuo* 抱朴子-祛惑 (*Book of the Master Who*

Keeps to Simplicity-Dispels confusion). However, there is still room for further discussion on the related situations and possible subsequent impacts.

In Han Dynasty beliefs, the Kunlun Mountain was the abode of the Heavenly Emperor, while in early Celestial Master Daoism, this mountain's main deity was replaced (Y. Wang 2020, p. 68). *Xiang'er Zhu* is the earliest existing Daoist work that explicitly claimed that Lord Lao resided in Kunlun⁹. Liu Yi pointed out that the idea regarding Laozi as the main deity in *Xiang'er Zhu* is inconsistent with the popular Han Dynasty beliefs, and he suspects that the currently existing version of this book may have been revised in later times (Y. Liu 2003, pp. 77–103). However, the *Xiang'er Zhu* clearly stated that Lord Lao resided in the Kunlun Mountain, which contradicted the records about Lord Lao's residence in the "Three Caverns" scriptures after the Eastern Jin Dynasty 東晉 (317–420) (as detailed in the following). Therefore, it could be speculated that the relevant passages in this book were either part of the original text or were formed before the Eastern Jin Dynasty. *Xiang'er Zhu* provided an interpretation of the term "one":

One is the Dao... When dispersed, it becomes Qi. When gathered, it becomes Great High Lord Lao. Lord Lao constantly governs Kunlun. 一者道也.....一散形為氣, 聚形為太上老君, 常治崑崙¹⁰

This passage equated Lord Lao with the "gathering form" of the Dao (or One) and designated the Kunlun Mountain as his settled location. The expression "zhi 治" is not uncommon, where "治" can be understood both as a verb meaning to "govern" or as a noun meaning "the place governed". However, considering Lord Lao's "Kunlun Great Dioceses 崑崙大治" mentioned below and the early Heavenly Master Daoist Twenty-four dioceses 二十四治 system, it is plausible to suggest that the phrase "Lord Lao constantly governs Kunlun" in *Xiang'er Zhu* may imply a projection of the "dioceses 治" organization of the early Heavenly Master Daoism tradition¹¹.

Nüqing Guilü 女青鬼律 (*Code of Nüqing for Controlling the Demons*) was a Daoist work that emerged in the Wei (220–265) and Jin (265–420) dynasties or even earlier (Schipper and Verellen 2004, pp. 127–29). This book claims that "Great Dao of the Most High 太上大道" could not bear the frequent disasters of the people, so dispatched Zhang Daoling 張道陵 to spread this scripture to stop the sufferings caused by ghosts. One passage in this book also reflects the idea of Lord Lao residing in Kunlun.

Dao says: The venerable Daoist Qi of Three-Five-Seven-Nine rules over the Kunlun Mountain of the Pure Tenuity. It appeared in three heavens and quickly enters your body and then you are untied and escape from the net and pay homage to Lord Lao.

道曰:三五七九道氣尊, 治在清微崑崙山。近見三天入人身, 解脫網羅見老君。(Nüqing 1988, DZ 790, vol. 18, 248a)

The Dao refers to the Great Dao of the Most High who passed down this book. From this passage, it can be inferred that the Kunlun Mountain was the divine realm pursued by those who have achieved success in cultivating the Dao and one can meet Lord Lao upon arrival. Although there are very few reliable documents passed down from the early Heavenly Master Daoism, a comparison of the passages in the *Xiang'er Zhu* and the *Nüqing Guilü* mentioned above reveals that Lord Lao's governance of Kunlun was indeed an important perspective within this Daoist organization at that time. This view was not accepted by the later Three Caverns Scriptures, but it still had a lasting impact in two ways.¹²

Firstly, a small number of Daoist priests and their organizations who strictly adhere to the doctrine of early Heavenly Master Daoism inherited this viewpoint. The surviving relevant materials are very limited, but fortunately, their date and context have been approximately confirmed. The rectifying movement of Daoism in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534) led by Kou Qianzhi (365–448) was a well-known historical event. This movement was based on the appearance of the Great High Lord Lao on Mount Song 嵩山 and his revelation of new scriptures. This resulted in Kou Qianzhi being recognized as a new

heavenly master and the owner of numerous sacred scriptures.¹³ The most important of these newly published scriptures is *Yunzhong Yinsong Xinke Zhijie* 雲中音誦新科之戒 (*New Liturgical Rules of the Hymns from amid the Clouds*), and the present *Laojun Yinsong Jie Jing* 老君音誦誡經 (*Book of the Hymnal Rules of Lord Lao*) is a part of this book. The Great High Lord Lao's speech from *Laojun Yinsong Jie Jing* included at least three explicit statements declaring that he resided on the Kunlun Mountain.

The *Taishang Laojun's Yinsong Jieling Wen* states: "In this present world, there are many evildoers. The fathers are not kind, children are not filial, and ministers are not loyal. ...Therefore, I withdrew and went far away to Kunlun Mountain... My diocese with pavilions and palaces is on Kunlun Mountain, and mansions interconnect one another... After settling disasters down, I will return and ascend to my abode at Kunlun".

《太上老君音誦戒令文》曰：我以今世之人作惡者多，父不慈、子不孝、臣不忠……吾是以引而遠去，乃之昆侖山上。……吾治在昆侖山，山上臺觀，眾樓殿堂，宮室連相接次……平定之後，還當昇舉，伏宅昆侖。¹⁴

In this passage, Lord Lao repeatedly emphasized his dwelling was on Mount Kunlun. Even if he occasionally descended to the mortal world, he would retire back to the Kunlun dioceses. The *Santian Nei Jiejing* 三天內解經 (*Explanations of the Essentials of Three Heavens*) was written during the Liu Song Dynasty (420–479). Chen Guofu, Masayoshi Kobayashi, Stephen R. Bokenkamp, Zhao Yi, and Li Gang have conducted in-depth research on this scripture.¹⁵ The scripture contains a very striking passage worth noting:

On the first day in the fifth month of the Renwu year, the first year of the Hanan era (142), Lord Lao and the Daoist Zhang Daoling met at the stone chamber on QuTing (渠亭) Mountain in Shu county, intending to journey to the Kunlun Great Diocese to visit the Newly Emerged Great High. The Great High believed that people feared evil spirits more than the true divines, hence he named himself the "Newly Emerged Lord Lao". He appointed Zhang as the Master of the Three Heavens and One and Orthodox, appeasing Qi of the Grand Capital of Mystery and entrusted him with the teaching of the One and Orthodox Covenant with the Powers, and the regulations of the Newly Emerged Lord Lao.

以漢安元年（142）壬午歲五月一日，老君於蜀郡渠亭山石室中，與道士張道陵將詣昆侖大治新出太上。太上謂世人不畏真正，而畏邪鬼，因自號為“新出老君”。即拜張為太玄都正一平氣三天之師，付張正一明威之道、新出老君之制。¹⁶

Archaeological discoveries from the Han dynasty provide evidence that there was an important deity called "Xinchu Laogui Taishang Laojun 新出老鬼太上老君 (the Newly Appeared Aged Demon-Great High Lord Lao)" in early Daoism. Liu Zhaorui, based on these discoveries and the above, "feared evil spirits more than the true divines" from the *Santian Nei Jiejing*, and believed that the self-proclaimed title "Xinchu Laojun (Newly Appeared Most High Lord Lao)" originally should be "Xinchu Laogui (Newly Appeared Aged Demon)" (Z. Liu 2005, pp. 172–79). The use of the term "aged demon" may be considered coarse and uncivilized when removed from its original historical and religious contexts, leading to later revisions. The relationship between "Lord Lao", "Great High", and "Newly Emerged Lord Lao" in the text is a confusing issue. "Great High" named himself "Newly Emerged Lord Lao" (or Newly Appeared Aged Demon), which suggests that they refer to the same person. However, the fact that Lord Lao led Zhang Daoling to pay their respects to the Newly Emerged Lord Lao implied that they were two different individuals. According to earlier legends of the Heavenly Masters, one of the main deities who imparted teachings to Zhang Daoling was Lord Lao. The account in *Santian Nei Jiejing* further complicates the tale of Zhang Daoling's commission legend. There are two plausible explanations: (1) both Lord Lao and the Newly Emerged Lord Lao essentially refer to the deified Laozi, and the two represent different revelations of the same divine entity, or (2) it may be a creative invention by the author of this scripture that was not widely accepted by later Daoists. Whatever the relationship between these two gods, the concept of the Kunlun Great Diocese as the residence of the Newly Emerged Lord Lao is already clearly reflected, which is sufficient for the present research. Another Daoist classic from

the Southern Dynasties (420–589) also confirmed the existence of this belief. *Taishang Lingbao Shengxuan Neijiao Jing* 太上靈寶昇玄內教經 (*Scripture of the Esoteric Doctrine of Ascent to Mystery*) produced before the Liang dynasty (502–557) was an important Daoist text in the medieval period. The complete text of this book has been lost, but based on the surviving fragments, Yamada Takashi compiled and edited a version of it. In the “Shengxuan Jing Dijiu Wuji Jiujie pin” 昇玄經第九無極九戒品 (The Ninth Chapter: Supreme Nine Precepts from Scripture of Ascent to Mystery) the following was said:

The Great High then from his Kunlun Diocese ascended to the Seven Treasures Virtue Abbey of the Heaven Top Diocese. He summoned Daoling and said to him: “My Dao emerged from the state of non-origination, before the beginning of the Great Beginning”.

太上於是昆侖治中，進登天首大治七寶道德觀上，召道陵而告之曰：“吾道出於無先，太初之前”。¹⁷

This passage is cited by the Daoist encyclopedias *Wushang Miyao* 無上秘要 (*The Essence of the Supreme Secrets*) (Yuwen and Zhou 2016, 100.1267) in the Northern Zhou dynasty (557–581) and *Shangqing Daolei Shixiang* 上清道類事相 (*The True Appearances of the Categories Pertaining to the Dao of the Highest Purity*), compiled by Wang Xuanhe (王懸河, fl. 983).¹⁸ It is also covertly borrowed by the *Zhengyi Fawen Falubu Yi* 正一法文法錄部儀 (*Protocol of the Section of Ritual Registers, of the Zhengyi Canon*) created by the Heavenly Master Daoists of the Southern Dynasties.¹⁹ The repeated citations of this passage reflect its evident significance. There is no doubt that this passage once again reveals the status of “Kunlun Great Diocese” as the residence of Zhang Daoling’s teacher, the Great High Lord Lao.

Based on a comprehensive review of the existing medieval Daoist texts, while the earliest Daoist scriptures such as *Xiang'er Zhu* placed the residence of Lord Lao on Kunlun, only a few subsequent works continued with this tradition. However, as the Daoist doctrines, particularly cosmology, continued to evolve, Kunlun was deemed no longer adequate as the abode of the great deity Lord Lao. The descriptions of the universe provided by new Daoist groups often incorporated old beliefs while emphasizing their own belief’s superiority and transcendence. They often integrated old doctrines into new systems of thought but only assigned them a lower position. Specifically, the status of Kunlun in Daoist belief gradually declined, and the view of Kunlun as a secondary immortal realm became common in the Daoist world after the Eastern Jin Dynasty. In Ge Hong’s (283–363) *Baopuzi Neipian*, a passage from *Taiqing Shendan Jing* 太清神丹經 (*the Book of the Divine Elixir of the Great Purity*) was quoted: “When a superior person attains the Dao, they ascend to become heavenly officials; when a middle-level person attains the Dao, they reside in the Kunlun Mountain 上士得道，昇為天官；中士得道，棲集昆侖”。²⁰ Pan Shizheng 潘師正 (586–684) incorporated “the concept of divines divided into three levels” theory into his famous work *Daomen Jingfa Xiangcheng Cixu* 道門經法相承次序 (*The Order of the Succession of the Daoist Scriptural Legacy*).²¹ The same content was inherited by *Yongcheng Jixian lu* 壩城集仙錄 (*Record of the Assembled Immortals of Yongcheng*) (Du and Luo 2013, p. 574), *Taiqing Shendan Zhongjing Xu* 太清神丹中經敘 (*The Explanation of the Central Book of the Divine Elixir of the Great Purity*) in the *Yunji Qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (*Cloudy Bookcase with Seven Labels*) (Zhang and Li 2003, 73.1663), and *Taishang Hunyuan Laozi Shilue* 太上混元老子史略 (*Short History of Laozi, Most High of Undifferentiated Beginning*).²² According to the accounts in the above works, it can be inferred that the concept of divines divided into three levels was spoken through the mouth of Yuanjun 元君, who was a female immortal that taught Lord Lao the “Great Clarity Alchemy”. Considering these details, it is highly likely that this concept originated from the Great Clarity tradition. There is a close relationship between Lord Lao and the Great Clarity tradition (see below). This dialogue between Yuanjun and Lord Lao was accepted by later works. *Daojiao Yishu* 道教義樞 (*The Pivotal Meaning of Daoist Doctrine*) by Meng Anpai 孟安排 (fl. 699) quoted similar words from the *Ziran Jingjue* 自然經訣 (*Instructions Concerning the Spontaneous Scripture*), stating the following:

The upper immortals ascend to heaven in broad daylight; the middle immortals dwell in famous mountains such as Kunlun and Penglai, constructing palaces in mid-air; the lower immortals often reside in caves and grottoes of various famous mountains.

上仙白日昇天；中仙棲于昆侖、蓬萊等名山，空中結宮室；下仙常棲諸名山洞室。²³

Ziran Jingjue seems to be the *Lingbao Zhenyi Ziran Jingjue* 靈寶真一自然經訣 (*Instructions Concerning the Spontaneous Scripture of the True One of Numinous Treasure*). This indicates that the Lingbao scriptures also accepted the views of the Three Immortal Sages. As Kunlun's position in the constantly evolving Daoist cosmology gradually diminished, it became inconvenient for the highly divine Lord Lao to continue to place its Great Diocese in this inferior immortal realm.

However, while the early Daoist understanding of Lord Lao residing in Kunlun gradually gave way to new beliefs, the shadow of Kunlun Mountain continued to loom over the later legends of Lord Lao. As mentioned earlier, Kunlun enjoyed a unique position as the center of the earth and the gateway to heaven during the Han dynasty.²⁴ The passage describing “Kunlun as Heavenly Ladder” in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 is considered to be the most concise expression:

Ascending Kunlun Mountain, at a point twice its height lies Liangfeng Mountain. Climbing it will not lead to death. Twice its height again lies the Xuanpu. Climbing it brings spiritual elevation and the ability to control wind and rain. Going up another two times its height leads to the top heaven, where climbing it grants divine powers and access to the abode of the Taidi. 昆侖之丘，或上倍之，是謂涼風之山，登之而不死。或上倍之，是謂懸圃，登之乃靈，能使風雨。或上倍之，乃維上天，登之乃神，是謂太帝之居。 (S. Zhang 1997, 4.432).

Perhaps due to the strong and lasting influence of Kunlun as the ladder/gateway to heaven, or perhaps because the early Daoist doctrine of Lord Lao's “constant governance of Kunlun” still held its influence, in the biographies of Lord Lao appearing after the Eastern Jin dynasty—whether before or after his “conversion of the barbarians 化胡”, or at a specific time when his life or accomplishment was transitioned—Lord Lao often needed to return to Kunlun for “ascending to heaven”. The “Laozi Huahu Jing Xu” 老子化胡經序 (Preface to the *Classic on Laozi's Conversion of the Barbarians*), which appeared during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, stated that after completing the work of Imperial Historian of the Zhou Dynasty, he “returned to Kunlun and would convert those in the land of the barbarians 言歸昆侖，化彼胡域”.²⁵ In the *Yiqie Daojing Yinyi Miaomen Youqi* 一切道經音義妙門由起 (*Phonological Glossary of the Daoist Canon and The Origin and Development of Daoist Doctrine*) by Shi Chongxuan 史崇玄 (d. 713), a similar description is quoted: “During the time of King You (re. 782–771 BC), Lord Lao along with twelve jade maidens, twenty-four immortals, and Guiguzi rode on the white deer to go out of the western strategic pass and head north towards Kunlun 至幽王時，老君從十二玉女、二十四仙人，並與鬼谷等俱乘白鹿，出西關，北之昆侖矣”.²⁶ With the development of the worship of Lord Lao, especially the well-known Daoist fervor brought about by the Tang ruling families' recognition of Lord Lao as their ancestor, the compilation and editing of Lord Lao's biography were able to rapidly advance and become essentially standardized. The basic contents of Lord Lao's biography in later generations were inherited from the biographies written during the Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty, which had strong stability. In relatively late Daoist materials in the Tang and Song dynasties, we can still see the imprints left by the early Kunlun legends on Laozi's biography.

Xie Shouhao's 謝守灝 (1134–1212) *Taishang Hunyuan Laozi Shilue* states that: During the reign of King Zhao of Qin 秦昭王 (re. 306–251 BC), Lord Lao “left through San Pass, crossed the Flowing Sands, ascended Kunlun Mountain, and returned to the Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace 復出散關，遂渡流沙，昇昆侖，還紫微上宮”.²⁷

Du Daojian's 杜道堅 (1237–1318) *Xuanjing Yuanzhi Fahui* 玄經原旨發揮 (*Dissertation on the Original Meaning of the Mysterious Scripture*): “The Sage Lao traversing the Flowing

Sands in his later years, ascended to Kunlun and returned to the Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace 老聖晚涉流沙, 西昇昆侖, 還紫微上宮”.²⁸

A similar expression is quite common in the post-Tang biography of Lord Lao, although such an association was particularly deliberate. In the Daoist belief during the medieval period, and especially during the Tang Dynasty, the immortals could ascend to heaven from every place, so specifically keeping “Kunlun” as a must-pass route for ascension seemed to be unnecessary and cumbersome. For the present study, more importantly, from the accounts of Xie Shouhao, Du Daojian, and others, it can be found that Lord Lao was given a residence in a higher cosmic level: the Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace 紫微上宮. The issue of the Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace is more complex and will be discussed later. Next, the focus will be on the most important residence set up by the medieval Daoists for Lord Lao: the Great Clarity Heaven.

2. Exquisite Palace and Hall in the Great Clarity Heaven

As one of the “Three Pure Ones 三清”, Lord Lao was commonly believed to reside in the Great Clarity Domain/Heaven 太清境/天 of the Three Clarity Realms after the Tang dynasty. Lord Lao’s stable placement in the Great Clarity Domain underwent a highly complicated evolution in the medieval period. Due to a lack of sources, it is unknown whether there was any doctrine debate surrounding Lord Lao’s shift in residence from Kunlun to the Great Clarity Domain. But overall, as mentioned above, the early Heavenly Master Daoism inherited the Kunlun belief from the Han dynasty and regarded Lord Lao as a great deity on the Kunlun Mountain. This concept left some traces in the later legends of Lord Lao. However, as the cosmological descriptions of Daoism in the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties further developed, the Great Clarity Heaven quickly replaced Kunlun as the common abode of Lord Lao.

Based on the available Daoist materials, we know that between the Han and Tang dynasties, Daoism had various celestial realms theories, including three heavens, nine heavens, thirty-six heavens, five hundred million heavenly realms, etc. There were also diverse descriptions of the celestial realms with the same levels. Following the integration of Daoist religious orders and textual systems starting from the Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties²⁹, these different understandings and interpretations about the celestial realms were eventually consolidated into the widely accepted “theory of thirty-six Heavens” during the early Tang dynasty.³⁰ The textual description of this imagery of heaven was very common during the Tang and Song dynasties. Based on “the summary of Daoist Three Caverns 道教三洞宗元” in the *Yunji Qiqian*, the following structure can be seen³¹:

Realms	Names	levels
Beyond the Three Realms 三界外	Grand Canopy Heaven 大罗天	One level
	Jade Clarity Domain 玉清境	One level
	Highest Purity Domain 上清境	One level
	Great Clarity Domain 太清境	One level
	Four Seed People Heavens 四種民天	Four Levels
Inside the Three Realms 三界內	The Formless Realm 無色界	Four Levels
	the Form Realm 色界	Eighteen Levels
	the Realm of Desire 欲界	Sixteen Levels

The three most important and supreme deities at that time were also embedded in the Three Clarity Domains: Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning 元始天尊 governed the Jade Clarity Domain, The Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawn 玉晨大道君 (later known as Heaven Worthy of the Numinous Treasure 靈寶天尊) governed the Highest Purity Domain, and the Great High Lord Lao governed the Great Clarity Domain. Upon learning of such a result of the doctrinal integration, the main task now falls on tracing the early

evolution of teachings that led to Lord Lao being embedded into the Great Clarity Domain and becoming its host.

The complex process of the evolution and integration of the Daoist Heaven's hierarchy before the Tang Dynasty has been deeply researched (see previous annotations). These studies allow for the avoidance of countless intricacies that used to be difficult to overcome, making the discussion more efficient and focused on the main theme. First, the process that established the Great Clarity Heaven as one of the Three Clarity Heavens will be briefly outlined. Fabrizio Pregadio's in-depth research on the Great Clarity tradition shows that the term "Great Clarity Heaven", which later became associated with Lord Lao's residence, originally referred to the highest spiritual state that a practitioner could attain. With the operation of Han dynasty alchemists, this spiritual state was transformed into the supreme immortal realm that could be reached by taking the great elixir of Golden Alchemy. At the same time, alchemical scriptures such as the *Jiudan Jing* 九丹經 (*Book of the Nine Elixirs*), *Taiqing Jing* 太清經 (*Scriptures of the Great Purity*), and *Jinye Jing* 金液經 (*Book of the Golden Liquor*) were regarded as sacred texts from the Great Clarity Heaven (Pregadio 2005, 35ff). The "Great Clarity Tradition" created by the group of alchemists from the Han Dynasty was not a "sect" or a strictly religious organization, but the knowledge system they built around the great elixir could be shared internally and ultimately condensed into the "Great Clarity section 太清部" scriptures in the *Daozang*.³² The traditional alchemists' esoteric nature made it difficult to sort out issues such as the era of creation, the process of transmission, and the mythological system of the Great Clarity scriptures.³³ However, Ge Hong clearly stated in his record of the transmission of his own Golden Alchemy technique from Zuo Ci 左慈 to Ge Xuan 葛玄, that the rise of the Great Clarity tradition can be traced back to at least the end of the Han Dynasty.³⁴ In the same work by Ge Hong, there are several passages describing the highest celestial realm, the Great Clarity Domain. One of them stated that Great Clarity was located forty li above the earth, and its wind was so fierce that mortal beings could not bear it³⁵. But here was a place where immortals lingered³⁶. The *Laozi Zhongjing* 老子中經 (also known as the *Taishang Laojun Zhongjing* 太上老君中經, *The Most High Lord Lao's Book of the Center*) is a peculiar Daoist scripture that listed over fifty divine immortals with their corresponding explanations. This scripture's compilation date was disputed, but it was asserted early on that Lord Lao resided in the realm of Great Clarity. He Jiangtao summarized several main views regarding the time of *Laozi Zhongjing*: Haruki Kusuyama 楠山春樹, Shigeki Maeda 前田繁樹, and Chie Katō 加藤千恵 believed the book was written in the fifth century; Kristofer Schipper, John Lagerwey, and Liu Yongming 劉永明 supported that this work was written during the Han Dynasty; Wang Ka 王卡 and Ding Peiren 丁培仁 considered this scripture to have been produced during the Wei-Jin period, while Liu Yi 劉屹 advocated for the early Eastern Jin Dynasty. He Jiangtao agreed with the view of scholars such as Kristofer Schipper and believed this work was composed in the middle to late Eastern Han Dynasty.³⁷ Recently, Gao Tonglin suggested that this was a work of the Liu Song dynasty, but one that extensively copied the previous Daoist scriptures (T. Gao 2021, pp. 106–31). Regardless, there seems to be no problem with the wide acceptance of the opinion that this scripture was written before the theories of the Highest Purity and the Numinous Treasure Realms were commonly accepted. The first immortal listed in the *Laozi Zhongjing* was the Supreme Grand One 上上太一, who was the father of the Dao and the pioneer of heaven and earth, located in the upper nine heavens and within the realm of Great Clarity.³⁸ The author placed the Great Clarity as the highest heavenly realm above the "Nine Heavens". More importantly, in the sections about the fifth and sixth immortals in the book, "Lord Lao" was mentioned:

Fifth Immortal: Lord of the Dao, also known as the One, is the central star of the Polaris on the Central Pole of the Supreme Heavenly Lord... Above is the Primordial pneuma of Great Clarity... Laozi and Taihe serve on his left and right... 第五神仙: 道君者, 一也, 皇天上帝中極北辰中央星是也.....上有太清元氣.....老子、太和侍之左右.....

Sixth Immortal: Lord Lao is the soul of heaven and the ruler of nature, always attending to the Lord of the Dao's side. Therefore, we nine immortals are called the Nine-Headed Lord. 第六神仙：老君者，天之魂也，自然之君也，常侍道君左右方。故吾等九人，九頭君也。³⁹

Fabrizio Pregadio believed that the "Supreme Grand One" and the "Lord of the Dao" in *Laozi Zhongjing* are both Dao or One, essentially the same deity.⁴⁰ If so, the Lord of the Dao is not only "above the Primordial pneuma of Great Clarity", but is also within the realm of Great Clarity. The presence of Lord Lao and Taihe (the seventh immortal in the same book, "the spirit of heaven 天之魄"⁴¹) alongside Lord of the Dao naturally placed them within the realm of Great Clarity as well. The discovery of early literature that explicitly placed "Lord Lao" within Great Clarity is exciting, but it is worth considering whether this "Lord Lao" is really our deified version of Laozi. A section clearly modified from the "Fifth Immortal" and "Sixth Immortal" in *Laozi Zhongjing* appeared in the *Dongzhen Taiyi Dijun Taidan Yinshu Dongzhen Xuanjing* 洞真太一帝君太丹隱書洞真玄經 (*Supreme One and Lord Emperors Secret Scripture of Grand Elixirs and Mysterious Scripture of Cavern Truth Canon*), which was compiled during the Six Dynasties period.⁴²

Taisu Jun Yuancheng Laozi, also known as the soul of heaven, governs in the Great Clarity Domain, within the Curved Array. He serves the Emperor Lord and is in charge of the pneuma of the True Primordia, hence he is known as Taisu Jun. Taihe Jun Huangcheng Laozi is the spirit of heaven, who also governs within the Great Clarity Domain and Curved Array. He is known as Taihe Jun and serves the Heavenly Emperor, in charge of the pneuma of the True Embryo. ...Taisu Yuancheng Laozi constantly serves the Emperor within Great Clarity; while Huangcheng Laozi serves the Heavenly Emperor and can be found in and out of Purple Sublimity, located in Kunlun. 太素君元成老子，亦天之魂，治在太清之中，勾陳之內，常侍帝君，主真元之炁也，號曰太素君矣。太和君皇成老子，天之魄也，亦治在太清勾陳之內，號曰太和君，常侍天帝，主胎元之氣也。.....太素元成老子，太清之中常侍帝君；皇成老子，常侍天帝，出入紫微，正在昆侖⁴³

Undoubtedly, this scripture of the Six Dynasties showed that the two "Laozi" and their Emperor Lord were situated within the realm of Great Clarity. However, the fact of two "Laozi" (or Lord Lao in *Laozi Zhongjing*) suggests that this title may not exclusively refer to the "Great High Lord Lao". Despite the existence of such doubt, based on an overall observation of the citation and this scripture, the Lord Lao in the above context should still mean the deified Laozi, the Great High Lord Lao. Based on the above citation, Lord Lao said "we nine immortals are called the Nine-headed Lord". It is not difficult to infer that the first-person pronoun "I/we 吾(等)" was the deity (Lord Lao) who was proclaiming this scripture. The end of the scripture quoted the *Shenxian Xuantu* 神仙玄圖 (*Mysterious Images of Divines and Immortals*) to speak about the requirements for the propagation of this scripture, commanding those who obtain it to carefully study it in "my" (still without specifying the name of the deity) voice. This suggests that the scripture was originally meant to be spoken through the mouth of a certain deity. In other words, all the first-person pronouns in this work pointed to the same deity. Based on the titles of the scripture, *Laozi Zhongjing*, *Taishang Laojun Zhongjing*, or *Laozi Lizang Zhongjing* 老子歷藏中經 (*Laozi's Book of the Center on Inspecting the Viscera*),⁴⁴ it can be inferred that the deity revealed the scripture was either Laozi or the Great High Lord Lao, and the term "I" in this text should be referring to our Lord Lao.

In the Great Clarity tradition, the records about the transmission lineage of alchemical techniques also pictured the Great Clarity Heaven as the abode of the Great High Lord Lao. Lord Lao was seen as an important link in the transmission of the Great Clarity scriptures. *Yunji Qiqian* was compiled in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), but it was mainly compiled from earlier Daoist texts. It summarized the brief religious history of the Great Clarity section of the Daoist canon:

Great Clarity. Master Meng said: "... These scriptures elucidate the art of the Golden Alchemy, and those who master it can ascend to the realm of Great Clarity, so it is called Great Clarity..".

Firstly, the Great Clarity regards the Great One as its origin.

... The *Jiujun Shenming Daoyao* says: "The *Taiqing Zhong Jing* came from Lord Lao and was passed down to Yuanjun and the Jiuhuang Zhenren." ... The *Zhengyi Jing* mentions: "The *Taiqing Jinye Tianwen Dili zhi Jing* consists of forty-six volumes". This scripture mainly discusses Golden Alchemy and also includes astrological and meteorological calculations, I should not show its details here. According to the *Mo Lu*, in the first year of the Han An era (142), the Great High transmitted these forty-six volumes of scripture to the Heavenly Master, and they have been passed down ever since.

言太清者，孟法師云：.....此經既明金丹之術，服禦之者遠昇太清，故言太清。.....太清者，太一為宗。

.....《九君申明道要》云：“《太清中經》，元始出來，出於老君，傳付元君、九皇真人.....。”《正一經》云：“《太清金液天文地理之經》，四十六卷。”此經所明，多是金丹之要，又著緯候之儀，今不詳辯。按《墨錄》所明，即漢安元年（142），太上以此經四十六卷付於天師，因此至今也。⁴⁵

In this summary, Lord Lao both served as the inheritor and transmitter of scriptures among the gods in the Great Clarity Heaven and a divinity who transmitted the Great Clarity scriptures to humanity through the Heavenly Master Zhang Daoling.⁴⁶ Legends about Lord Lao's participation and even leadership in the transmission of the Great Clarity scriptures are clearly evident in the materials on immortals. In Du Guangting's 杜光庭 (850–933) *Yongcheng Jixian Lu*, such as in the story of (Supreme) Yuanjun's teaching the *Taiqing Shendan Jing*, Lord Lao still appeared as a guiding figure.⁴⁷

According to materials such as the *Dongzhen Taiyi Dijun Taidan Yinshu Dongzhen Xu-anjing*, in the Highest Purity doctrine, Lord Lao was placed in the Highest Purity Heaven, but was not the main deity of this realm. However, the elevating movement of Lord Lao's godhood in the Han Dynasty, and especially the further popularization of the Daoist teachings that revered Lord Lao as the Dao, made the later Daoist believers easily shape Lord Lao as the host of the Great Clarity Realm. From the results reflected in the literature, this was indeed the case. However, even as his identity as the "god of the universe" (or the incarnation of the Dao) became the mainstream belief in Daoism during the Eastern Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties, the actual status of Lord Lao, the highest deity of the Great Clarity realm, suffered a decline in the divine world and his heavenly realm's position also decreased (although retaining the same name). Now, let us turn our attention to the views of the Highest Purity and Numinous Treasure Heavenly Realms, Three Heavens (or Three Pure Ones), and the dwarfing of Lord Lao's Great Clarity residence.

Highest Purity and Numinous Treasure were important Daoist traditions that emerged in southern China during the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties. Along with the pre-existing Orthodox and One Covenant with the Powers, they dominated the Daoist movement for the following centuries and blended to form the mainstream Daoist doctrine. From the "Thirty-Six Heavens" model (See previous table), formed by integrating the heaven views of the Highest Purity and Numinous Treasure, it can be observed visually that the Great Clarity Heaven where Lord Lao resided was no longer the highest as before in the traditional Great Clarity system, but only the fourth-ranked celestial realm and the lowest of the Three Purity Heavens. The evolution of the "Three Heavens" during the Han and Tang Dynasties is also worth a brief discussion. The "Three Heavens" had various meanings, and these different meanings became intertwined due to the integration and analogy made by Daoist followers. The Heavenly Master Daoism, which emerged at the end of the Han Dynasty, first proposed the "Three Heavens" belief to replace the "Six Heavens", which had become outdated Qi 故氣 (Z. Wang 1999, pp. 22–49; Lu 2018a, pp. 60–64; Zhao 2006, pp. 43–48, etc.). But based on the existing materials, the "Three Heavens" at this

time only appear as names such as “Mystery and Prime Supreme Three Heavens of Great Clarity 太清玄元上三天”, and it seems to refer to a heavenly realm called the “Three Heavens”, rather than three different levels of a heavenly realm (Kobayashi 1990, pp. 482–510; W. Sun 2022, p. 34). According to Lu Min’s research, the formation and development of the “Three Heavens” went through several stages, including combining the Three Heavens with the Pure Tenuity Heaven 清微天, Leftovers of Yu’s Food Heaven 禹餘天, and Great Scarlet Heaven 大赤天; corresponding with the Jade Clarity Domain, Highest Purity Domain, and Great Clarity Domain; and placing important figures such as the Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning, the Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawn, and Lord Lao within the Three Heavens at different stages. Until Lu Xiuqing’s 陸修靜 (406–477) day, the “Three Heavens” had not yet been associated with the Three Clarity Domains 三清境, nor had it been split into the three levels of heaven.⁴⁸ Sun Weijie has pointed out that it was not until the Liu Song Dynasty that the *Taishang Santian Zhengfa Jing* 太上三天正法經 (*Scripture of the Correct Law of the Three Heaven*) provided descriptions of the Pure Tenuity Heaven, Leftovers of Yu’s Food Heaven, and Great Scarlet Heaven that were higher than the more traditional Nine Heavens. Another work, *Shangqing Waiguo Fangpin Qingtong Neiwen* 上清外國放品青童內文 (*Esoteric Text of the Green Lad on the Goods Deposited in Foreign Countries*), which dates back no earlier than the Liu Song Dynasty, proposed the concept of the Three Clarity Heavens—Jade Clarity, Highest Purity, and Great Clarity. However, it regarded the Pure Tenuity Heaven, Leftovers of Yu’s Food Heaven, and Great Scarlet Heaven as the upper, middle, and lower layers of the Jade Clarity Domain, rather than corresponding to the Three Clarity Domains as they did later (W. Sun 2022, pp. 34–35). The popularization of the new integrated “Three Heavens” such as “Jade Clarity-Pure Tenuity” and their corresponding hierarchical relationships clearly did not occur before the Liu Song period. What is even more complicated is that the Daoist traditions that emerged in the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, such as Highest Purity and Numinous Treasure, were relatively easy to reach a consensus on the issue of Jade Clarity and Highest Purity when sharing ideas about the heavenly realms. However, there was more hesitation regarding the question of where Lord Lao resided in the “Great Clarity Heaven”. Lu Min noticed this and pointed out that the ancient Numinous Treasure Scriptures *Duren Jing* 度人經 (*Scripture of Saving Human Beings*) only mentions Jade Clarity and Highest Purity, without Great Clarity. When Wushang Miyao quoted the *Sanhuang Jing* 三皇經 (*the Writ of the Three Sovereigns*), it listed Jade Clarity, Highest Purity, and Supreme Pole 太極 (rather than Great Clarity) as the heavenly realms where the Three Caverns immortals are living. The last seat beside Jade Clarity and Highest Purity among the Three Pure Domains posed a difficult choice between Great Clarity and Supreme Pole in the Daoist doctrine of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. In the end, “Great Clarity” emerged as the winner, but “Supreme Pole” also pointed out other forks in the journey of searching for Lord Lao’s residence. These issues will be addressed later in this paper. By the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Great Clarity Domain eventually became the lowest level among the Three Realms, stabilized and undisputed. In the *Shangqing Taishang Kaitian Longqiao Jing* 上清太上開天龍蹕經 (*Book of the Dragon Stilts That Open up Heaven, a Supreme Purity Scripture of the Most High*), which is often used as the classical Daoist cosmological literature of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the names and hierarchy of the Three Clarity Domains have been determined:

The way of the transcendents/immortals regards life as the most important [thing], therefore it cultivates it/life. At first, cultivators practiced in the mortal world, but as they delved deeper into their cultivation, they entered the immortal realms. Through constant migration, they advanced step by step, first entering the Great Clarity Domain as immortals, then the Highest Purity Domain as Perfect Beings, then the Jade Clarity Domain as Saints, and finally reaching the realm of Grand Canopy—where they achieve the ultimate state of the Dao. 仙道主生, 因生修習。仙之言遷, 遷昇太清。遷仙入真, 上昇上清。遷真入聖, 上昇玉清。遷聖入道, 上昇大羅, 至道之境⁴⁹

As the concept of Three Clarity Heavens gradually took shape, the hosts in the Three Heavens also underwent some adjustments.

The final combination of Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning, Heaven Worthy of the Numinous Treasure, and Lord Lao were not the original three main deities. The “three Treasure Lords 三寶君” who were believed to uncover the Three Caverns Scriptures were originally the most prominent deities in the Three Pure Domains. *Dongxuan Jiutian Jing* 洞玄九天經 (*Nine Heavens Scripture of Dongxuan*) quoted by Wushang Miyao explained that the Heavenly Treasure Lord 天寶君 was the deity of the Great Cavern, who revealed the Great Cavern scriptures in the first year of the Longhan 龍漢 era and was known as the “Supreme Vast Possession Jade Clarity Palace 高上大有玉清宮”; the Numinous Treasure Lord 靈寶君, the Cavern Mystery deity who revealed the Cavern Mystery scripture in the first year of the Chiming 赤明 era and was then known as the “Jade Purity Seven Treasures Pole Star Terrace of Supreme Purity Capital of Mystery 上清玄都玉清七寶紫微宮”; the Divine Treasure Lord 神寶君 was the deity of Cavern Divinity, who revealed the Cavern Divinity scriptures in the first year of the Shanghuang 上皇 era and was known as the “Three Sovereigns Great Clarity Supreme Pole Palace 三皇洞神太清太極宮”.⁵⁰ This viewpoint had a strong influence from the late Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang Dynasties. In the early Tang Dynasty, the *Daomen Jingfa Xiangcheng Cixu* recorded a dialogue between Pan Shizheng and Emperor Gaozong 唐高宗 (re. 649–683). This book repeatedly mentioned the notion that the Three Heavens, including Pure Tenuity heaven, were equivalent to the Three Domains including the Jade Clarity Domain, and the Three Treasure Lords, respectively, governed the Three Domains. However, there is a lack of direct explanation about whether Lord Lao was the host of Great Clarity.⁵¹ From Li Heshu’s examination into the process of the formation of the “Three Pure Ones” as supreme deities, it is evident that Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning, the Lord of Great Dao, and Lord Lao gained significant prestige during the early medieval Daoist movement. These three became widely recognized as the ultimate deities in the Tang dynasty, but their status as the supreme deities of the Three Pure Domains was the result of hundreds of years of evolution that culminated in the late Tang and even early Song dynasties (H. Li 2019, pp. 1–55). However, under the influence of the Great Clarity tradition, the combination of Lord Lao and the Great Clarity Heaven has always disclosed a close relationship. In other words, although the Great Clarity Heaven was only one of the optional components of the Three Clarity Heavens, there was ambiguity as to whether Lord Lao was the highest deity of Great Clarity Heaven, but the concept of Lord Lao being in Great Clarity had almost never been questioned. Wang Xuanhe 王懸河 (ca. 680) in his *Sandong Zhunang* 三洞珠囊 (*The Pearl Bag of the Three Caverns*) explicitly stated that “the Supreme Pole Palace in the Great Clarity Domain is home to Great High Lord Lao, and it is located above the thirty-third heaven 大(太)清境太極宮, 即太上老君, 位在三十三天之上也”.⁵² Although Du Guangting hoped to explain the idea that Lord Lao could exist in multiple universes by using the concept of Lord Lao possessing multiple incarnations, he still had to rely on traditional beliefs and place Lord Lao’s main residence in the Great Clarity Heaven. According to Du Guangting’s *Daode Zhenjing Guang Shengyi* 道德真經廣聖義 (*Explications Expanding upon the Sage’s Commentary on the True Scripture of the Way and Its Power*), Lord Lao “spreads his incarnations and applies the appeals without any boundary or limitation. But Lord Lao’s body is pure and inactive, remaining constantly in the palace of Great Clarity 分形應感, 無量無邊. 而老君體端寂無為, 凝然常住於太清之宮也”.⁵³ Lord Lao’s “temporary residences” created by the Daoist doctrine movement in the Six Dynasties could be our closing focus. By examining these temporary residences, there is an opportunity to glimpse into other possible—though interrupted—trajectories of Daoist thought in their evolution.

3. The Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace, Supreme Pole Domain, and the Difficulties in Integrating the Godhood of Gold Portal Latter Saint

In addition to the influential beliefs of the residences of Kunlun and Great Clarity, there were also the perspectives that Lord Lao resided in the Purple Sublimity (Ultimate)

Palace 紫微(上)宮 and the Supreme Pole Heaven 太極天. These viewpoints had a certain influence at that time but gradually fell out of favor. These temporary abodes of Lord Lao can be understood as cutoff branches in the evolution of Daoist thought.

3.1. Lord Lao's Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace

The mentions of Lord Lao residing in the Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace were not particularly rare in medieval Daoist scriptures, but the relevant records were ambiguous and confusing. During the Tang dynasty, when annotating the *Duren Jing*, Li Shaowei 李少微 quoted an earlier text, the *Yin Shi Xuanzhong Ji* 尹氏玄中記 (*Yin's Record of the Mysteries*), stating that the "Great High Lord Lao constantly resides in the Purple Sublimity Palace, also known as the Heavenly Sovereign, the Heavenly Worthy of the Great One, and the Gold Portal Saint Lord 太上老君常居紫微宮, 一號天皇大帝, 一號太乙天尊, 一號金闕聖君".⁵⁴ Xuanyi 玄嶷 (fl. the late 7th to early 8th century) also noted this Daoist view, stating: "Laozi descended from the Purple Sublimity Palace and conferred the Heavenly Master position on Daoling 老子從紫微宮下降, 授道陵天師之任".⁵⁵ "Shi Lao Zhi" (Chapter on Buddhism and Daoism) in the *Wei Shu* (*the History of Wei*) 魏書·釋老誌 written by Wei Shou 魏收 (507–572) stated: "the origin of the Daoist tradition is derived from Laozi... residing in the Jade Capital, he is the leader of the God-Kings; descending into the Purple Sublimity he is the master of the flying immortals 道家之原, 出於老子.....上處玉京, 為神王之宗; 下在紫微, 為飛仙之主".⁵⁶ Medieval Daoist believers devoted painstaking effort to explaining the Purple Sublimity Palace, but undoubtedly, the root of this Daoist heavenly palace was the traditional astronomy concept of the Purple Sublimity Enclosure 紫微垣. In the *Wushang Miyao*, the Seven Treasures Purple Sublimity Palace of Primordial Yang of Xuandu 玄都元陽七寶紫微宮 located in "the Grand Palace of Primordial Yang 元陽太宮" was incorporated into the system of "The Palace of the Celestial Officials 天官宮".⁵⁷ Celestial Officials 天官 was the Chinese ancient astronomical term corresponding to star patterns. If we recall the above analysis of the *Laozi Zhongjing* and the *Dongzhen Taiyi Dijun Taidan Yinshu Dongzhen Xuanjing*, we can see that Laozi (and Daojun) were situated at the "Central Star of the Polaris on the Central Pole 中極北辰中央星" and "Within the Gouchen 勾陳之內", both of which were the names of constellations. Regarding this, the important medieval astronomical text "Tianwen Zhi" in *Jin Shu* 晉書·天文志 (Chapter on the Astronomical Record in *Jin History*) may offer some inspiration.

The Five Stars of the North Pole and the Six Stars of the Curved Array are all in the Purple Sublimity Palace. The North Star is the most revered of the North Pole, and Pivot Star is the pivot of heaven. ... The star east of the North Pole is called the Recorder Under the Pillar, which oversees the recording of sins. 北極五星, 勾陳六星, 皆在紫宮中。北極, 北辰最尊者也, 其紐星, 天之樞也。.....極東一星, 曰柱下史, 主記過。 (Fang et al. 1974, 11.289)

"The Purple Palace" referred to the central palace of the constellation Purple Sublimity Palace. "Recorder Under the Pillar 柱下史" was one of Laozi's common appellations. As is well known, it is believed that Laozi once served as this official during the Zhou dynasty. Although there is a lack of direct documentary evidence, such a connection may have stimulated some Daoist practitioners to place Lord Lao's residence in the Purple Sublimity Palace of the Stars, especially considering that the Purple Sublimity Palace was the core institution in the sky.

The traditional astronomical knowledge about the Purple Sublimity Palace should be one of the origins of the Daoist imagination of their newly created universe. However, the universe depicted by Daoists differs significantly from the traditional astronomical descriptions. The latter's main purpose was "observing the sky to determine the agricultural time 觀象授時". The descriptions of the heavenly realm continuously created by the Daoist believers during the Han and Tang dynasties always tried to transcend the boundaries of traditional constellation worship. The different individuals made various interpretations of the Purple Sublimity Palace where Lord Lao resided. For example, "The Stanzas on the

Offices of Three Realms 三界宮府品” in *Wushang Miyao* included several versions of the Purple Sublimity Palace:

Purple Sublimity Palace. It is located at Yuming Field outside the Northern Sea, on the Xuanlong Mountain where the Lady of the Purple Sublimity resides. 紫微宮。右在北溟外羽明野玄隴山, 紫微夫人之所居。

Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace. It is situated at Mount Jade-Capital in the northwestern part of the Grand Capital of Mystery. 紫微上宮。右在玄都西北玉京山。

Seven Treasures of Purple Sublimity Palace. It is located at the Mount Jade-Capital in the Grand Capital of Mystery. 七寶紫微宮。右在太玄都玉京山。

Seven Treasures Pole Star Terrace of Primordial Yang of Capital of Mystery is where the Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning is in a state of peace and no-action and left to ponder all living beings. 玄都元陽七寶紫微宮。右原始元尊恬然安漠, 寂然無為, 思念萬兆之所。⁵⁸

In the above Purple Sublimity Palaces, besides the realm of the Lady of the Purple Sublimity, all the other celestial Purple Sublimity Palaces appeared to be the varied results of Daoism interpreting the same celestial Purple Sublimity Palace.

Based on the current Daoist scriptures, it can be found that there were several different views on which celestial level Lord Lao's Purple Sublimity Palace was located. Several celestial realms, including the Grand Canopy 大羅, Highest Purity, Jade Clarity, and Great Clarity, had been considered as its location. In the *Taishang Dongxuan Lingbao Yebao Yinyuan Jing* 太上洞玄靈寶業報因緣經 (*Scripture of the Most High from the Dongxuan Lingbao Canon Regarding Retribution and Karmic Causes*), which was approximately written during the Northern and Southern dynasties, the deity self-reported his incarnations in different identities in the realms of Jade Clarity Domain, Highest Purity Domain, Great Clarity Domain, Palace of Primordial Yang, and the Purple Sublimity Palace.⁵⁹ From this narration, it can be inferred that the author of this scripture seemed to believe that the Purple Sublimity Palace was located somewhere outside the “Three Clarity Domains 三清境”, but the specific location was not mentioned. The viewpoint that the Purple Sublimity Palace was located in the Supreme Grand Canopy Heaven was supported by some Numinous Treasure scriptures. For example, the *Dongxuan Lingbao Yujing Shan Buxu Jing* 洞玄靈寶玉京山步虛經 (*Lingbao Scripture on Pacing the Void at Jade-Capital Mountain*) stated: “the Jade-Capital Mountain of Mysterious Capital is above the Three Clarity Domains, keeping spotless and dustless. The Jade Capital Golden Portal, Seven Treasures Mastery Terrace, and the Purple Sublimity Ultimate Palace stand on this mountain 玄都玉京山在三清之上, 無色無塵。上有玉京金闕、七寶玄臺、紫微上宮, 中有三寶神經”。⁶⁰ In the *Taishang Dongxuan Lingbao Zhihui Zuigen Shangpin Dajie Jing* 太上洞玄靈寶智慧罪根上品大戒經 (*Lingbao Scripture on the Supreme Great Rules of Wisdom Concerning the Roots of Guilt*), when describing this scripture's result, it stated: “this text should be sent back to the Seven Treasures Mastery Terrace in the Purple Sublimity Palace above the Grand Canopy 其文當還大羅之上七寶玄臺紫微宮中”。⁶¹ Lu Xiujing's *Dongxuan Lingbao Zhai Shuo Guangzhu Jiefa Deng Zhuyuan Yi* 洞玄靈寶齋說光燭戒罰燈祝願儀 (*Observations on the Lingbao Retreat, Especially on Lights, Beacons, Rules, Punishments, Lamps, and Vows*) shared a similar view.⁶² However, the placement of the Purple Sublimity Palace in the Highest Purity Domain was also mentioned in materials from around the same period. In the *Dongxuan Lingbao Ziran Jiutiansheng Shenzhang Jing* 洞玄靈寶自然九天生神章經 (*Stanzas of the Life Spirits of the Nine Heavens from the Dongxuan Lingbao Canon*), it said that the Numinous Treasure Lord resided in the Highest Purity Heaven and his residence was known as “the Jade Capital Seven Treasures Pole Star Terrace of Supreme Purity Capital of Mystery 上清玄都玉京七寶紫微宮”。⁶³ The *Taishang Lingbao Hongfu Miezui Xiangming Jing* 太上靈寶洪福滅罪像名經 (*Scripture of the Metaphoric Names for Eliminating Guilt and Increasing Good Fortune*) which was possibly compiled during the Tang Dynasty, held that the Cavern Mystery Twelve Scriptures existed in “the Purple Sublimity Palace

of Seven Treasures of Primordial Yang in the Leftovers of Yu's Food Heaven of the Highest Purity Domain 上清境禹餘天玄都元陽七寶紫微宮".⁶⁴ The view that the Purple Sublimity Palace was located in the Jade Clarity Heaven was not very common, but it was not completely absent either. The *Qiyu Xiuzhen Zhengpin Tu* 七域修真證品圖 (*Diagram Demonstrating the Hierarchy of Degrees in the Practice of the True and of the Seven Regions*) might be written during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. It was important for understanding the arrangement of the heavenly realms in Daoism. The book stated that the domain governed by the Great High Lord Lao was the Great Clarity Domain, and it also indicates that the Purple Sublimity Palace was in the Pure Tenuity Heaven of the Jade Clarity Domain 玉清境清微天.⁶⁵ In later Daoist materials, there were occasional attempts to combine the concepts that "Lord Lao governs the Great Clarity Domain" and "Lord Lao always resides in the Purple Sublimity Palace". As a result, the Purple Sublimity Palace was placed within the Great Clarity Heaven. The *Taishang Dongshen Sanyuan Miaoben Fushou Zhenjing* 太上洞神三元妙本福壽真經 (*Real Scripture of Blessings and Longevity, Revealing the Marvelous Root of the Three Principles, from the Dongshen Canon*), compiled by Miao Shanshi 苗善時 in the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), stated: "The Great Saint Ancestor Mystery and Prime Dao Virtue Heavenly Lord Great High Lord Lao 大聖祖玄元道德天尊太上老君 is in the Purple Sublimity Palace of the Great Clarity Domain".⁶⁶ However, this viewpoint did not conform to the established Daoist description of the heavenly realm and ostensibly had no significant impact.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the Purple Sublimity Palace was believed to be Lord Lao's residence. However, as Daoist cosmology rapidly evolved and adjusted, both the location of this Palace and the abodes of Lord Lao were rapidly changed in the Daoist faith. Ultimately, within the integrated Daoist universe, the Purple Sublimity Palace became a palace under the rule of the Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawn in the Highest Purity Domain and was no longer associated with Lord Lao. Although this heavenly palace no longer belonged to Lord Lao, the influence of the old belief was not completely eradicated. In the *Hunyuan Shengji* 混元聖紀 (*Annals of the Sage of Undifferentiated Beginning*) written during the Song Dynasty, it was still believed that after Lord Lao went west through the San Pass 散關, he "ascended Kunlun and returned to the Purple Sublimity Palace".⁶⁷

3.2. The Supreme Pole Domain and the Godhood of the Gold Portal Latter Saint

As mentioned earlier, in the development of the Daoist cosmic concept during the medieval period, there was a potential struggle between the Supreme Pole Domain and the Great Clarity Domain. Although the Great Clarity Domain ultimately emerged victorious and became the eternal residence of Lord Lao, the Supreme Pole Domain that once housed Lord Lao continued to play a sustained role in the Daoist doctrine. While the heavenly realms ruled by Lord Lao were constantly adjusted, the Gold Portal Latter Saint was gradually identified with Lord Lao, and this deity was thus mixed into the scheme of the spatial arrangement of the Daoist universe. This assimilation phenomenon was both confusing and fascinating.

As mentioned above, it was not until the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties that the Great Clarity Domain became one of the "Three Clarity Domains". The description of the Divine Alchemies in *Daoji Jing* 道跡經 (*The Scripture on the Trace of Dao*) listed the Great Clarity Alchemy, Supreme Pole Alchemy, Highest Purity Alchemy, and Jade Clarity Alchemy in order of their belonging to the celestial realms from low to high.⁶⁸ This showed that the Supreme Pole Realm was at a higher level than Great Clarity but lower than Highest Purity. The quotation of *Sanhuang Jing* in *Wushang miyao* recorded, "therefore, the Great Cave is on the Jade Clarity, the Cavern Mystery is in the City of Highest Purity, and the Total Name of the Cavern Divinity is in Supreme Pole 故大洞處於玉清之上, 洞玄則在於上清之城, 洞神總號則在於太極".⁶⁹ It can be inferred that "in the early version of the *Sanhuang Jing*, the Three Pure Realms were actually composed of Jade Clarity, Highest Purity, and Supreme Pole".⁷⁰ The process of Lord Lao being placed into the Supreme

Pole Heaven is not very clear, but more pieces of evidence support this fact. First are the titles that Lord Lao owned. *Zhengao* 真誥 (*Declarations of the Perfects*), compiled by Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), one of the fundamental texts of the Highest Purity scriptures, mentioned that the Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawns was the descendant of the Great Dao—“the Perfect of the Highest Purity and the teacher of Lord 上真人, 為老君之師”. “Lord Lao is the disciple of Great High (the Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawns). Lord Lao knew the secrets of longevity when he was seven years old and became the Perfect of the Supreme Pole 老君者, 太上之弟子. 年七歲而知長生之要, 是以為太極真人” (Tao and Zhao 2011, 5.78). Wang Xuanhe’s *Sandong Zhunang* stated: “The Grand Mystery is the capital of the Patriarch of Supreme Pole. Laozi resides here and responds to all directions 太玄者, 太宗極主之所都也. 老子都此, 化應十方, 不可稱述”.⁷¹ “Taizong Jizhu 太宗極主” appeared to be a reversed version of “Taiji Zongzhu 太極宗主” (the Patriarch of Supreme Pole). Wang Haoyue discovered that in the *Taiji Zuoxiangong Qingwenjing* 太極左仙公請問經 (*The Scripture Originate from Taiji Zuo Xiangong’s Question*), the divine name of Lord Lao was Superior Laozi of the Most High and Supreme Pole, Superior Master 太上太極高上老子無上法師 and the Perfect of the Supreme Pole, Superior Master 太極真人高上法師.⁷² It is suspected that the influence of the Perfect of the Supreme Pole Xu Laile 徐來勒 in the Numinous Treasure scriptures became much greater, leading later believers to mistakenly accept that “the Perfect of the Supreme Pole” was especially referring to Xu (H. Wang 2022, pp. 49–50). From such names, it can be inferred that Lord Lao did hold the positions of “the Perfect of the Supreme Pole” and “the Patriarch of Supreme Pole”, and his relationship with the Supreme Pole Domain was evident enough. More visual materials showing Lord Lao residing in the Supreme Pole Domain were the descriptions of celestial hierarchies in *Qiyu Xiuzhen Zhengpin Tu* and *Zhenling Weiye Tu* 真靈位業圖 (*Table of the Rank and Functions in the Pantheon*).

Qiyu Xiuzhen Zhengpin stated that “the way of cultivation, from the mundane to the holy, ascends and descends through seven realms 修道之法, 從凡至聖, 昇降七域”, and then showed a listing of the immortal titles in each of the seven realms in order. The general framework is as follows:

Stages	Host
First Fruit: Immortal of the Cave Palaces 第一初果洞宮仙人	
Second fruit: the Perfect Immortal of the Void Palaces on the famous mounts 第二次果名山之上虛宮地真人	
Third Fruit: the Perfect of Nine Palaces 第三次果為九宮真人	
Fourth Fruit: Great Clarity Supreme Immortals 第四果證位為太清上仙	Great High Lord Lao
Fifth Fruit: The Perfects of the Supreme Pole 第五太極真人果位	The relevant palaces are above Great Clarity and below Supreme Clarity, governed by Lord Lao.
Sixth Fruit: The Perfects of Highest Purity 第六果位為上清真人	It is located above Supreme Pole, in the Highest Purity Domain, governed by The Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawn.
Seventh Fruit: Jade Clarity Sages 第七極果為玉清聖人	Merged with Dao.

It can be seen that the author of *Qiyu Xiuzhen Zhengpin Tu* generally accepted the mainstream Daoist cosmological structure combining the Three Heavens, Three Clarity Domains, and Three Honors (Lord Lao, Lord of Great Dao of Jade Dawn and Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning). However, this text gave a rather unique explanation regarding the immortal beings occupying the Great Clarity and the Supreme Pole Fruit Positions. While the Great Clarity Domain where Lord Lao resided was described similarly

to the contemporary accounts, the Supreme Pole Fruit Position and relevant palaces were located in a special space above Great Clarity and below Highest Purity. This area was also attributed to Lord Lao's jurisdiction. In this system of immortals and transcendence realms, Lord Lao remarkably occupies two different "fruit positions" and two immortal domains simultaneously. This clearly problematic issue could only be explained by the author's imperfect attempt to blend the divergent and conflicting doctrines.

Compared with the *Qiyu Xiuzhen Zhengpin Tu*, the case presented in the *Zhenling Weiye Tu* was even more complex. The latter involved the structural contradictions caused by the blending of Lord Lao and the Gold Portal Latter Saint. The *Zhenling Weiye Tu* was believed to have been originally created by Tao Hongjing and later re-edited by Lüqiu Fangyuan 閻丘方遠 (d. 906). This work divided the Daoist deities into seven levels according to their ranks, and each level had the positions of left, middle, and right.

Levels in the <i>Zhenling Weiye Tu</i>
Jade Clarity
Highest Purity
Supreme Pole
Great Clarity
Nine Palaces
Three Officials 三官
Feng Capital 豐都

The existence of the Supreme Pole Domain can be clearly seen from the above structure. Amid the Great Clarity realm was the "Great Clarity Great High Lord Lao" with the note indicating that the "Lord of Great Clarity, rules over all people below 太清道主, 下臨萬民" (Tao et al. 2013, p. 169). This was consistent with the popular Daoist belief that Lord Lao governed Great Clarity. However, the problem was that other deities or "incarnations" of Lord Lao also appeared in the Great Clarity Domain. "Lao Dan 老聃",⁷³ one of the recognized names or incarnations of Lord Lao, occupied the right position of the Supreme Pole. "Left Perfect of the Supreme Pole, the Central Yellow Lord Lao 太極左真人中央黃老君", who occupied the left position of the Supreme Pole, was also an early deity incarnation of Laozi. Based on the descriptions in the medieval Daoist scriptures summarized by Wang Jiakui, it appeared that Daoist practitioners at that time believed that the Central Yellow Lord Lao was a disciple of the Lord of Great Dao of Most High. He mastered Dao at the age of seven and finally achieved the status of the Perfect of the Supreme Pole. So why were these identities of Lord Lao placed in different immortal realms? Did Tao Hongjing and Lüqiu Fangyuan not realize that the Great Clarity Great High Lord Lao, Lao Dan, and the Left Perfect of the Supreme Pole the Central Yellow Lord Lao were all different godhoods of Laozi? One possible answer is that Tao Hongjing and Lüqiu Fangyuan could only rely on the descriptions in the existing scriptures to arrange the hierarchy of these deities. The contradictions inherent in the different scriptures could not be completely eliminated. The sacred nature of these scriptures limited the ability of Tao Hongjing and other Daoists to integrate all the doctrines into a coherent whole. Therefore, regardless of the intentions of Tao and Lüqiu to organize a clear and systematic genealogy of deities, and to understand the origins of divine beings and their godhoods, they still had to strictly adhere to the original descriptions in the scriptures when arranging these deities. This ultimately led to Lord Lao and his incarnations appearing in multiple positions in both the Great Clarity Domain and the Supreme Pole Domain. The same problem also occurred with another godhood of Lord Lao, the Gold Portal Latter Saint, which involved the messianism of medieval Daoism.

The belief of Kalpa 劫 has had a profound impact on Chinese politics and society since the Han dynasty (Wu 2014, pp. 144–54; Y. Sun 2015, pp. 1–32, 101–64, etc.). After the rise of Daoism, especially during the Eastern Jin dynasty when it was advocated by believers of the Highest Purity Daoist tradition, Daoists generally accepted the eschatology that this

world was approaching its destruction, and the savior Holy Emperor of Gold Portal Latter Saint 金闕後聖 would save the world.⁷⁴ Those who claim to believe in Daoism and become “seed people 種民” should successfully survive the cosmic disaster and gain eternity in the new world of the Latter Saint. The study of eschatology and messianism in medieval Daoism has long been a topic of great interest.⁷⁵ What needs to be briefly discussed here is the relationship between the savior Gold Portal Latter Saint and our Lord Lao. According to the current research, the Gold Portal Latter Saint was originally created by the medieval Daoists without a direct prototype of an ancient figure. However, this deity was quickly rewritten by Daoists after the Eastern Jin Dynasty and equated with other figures. E. Zürcher had discovered the phenomenon in which the Gold Portal Latter Saint and another savior “True Lord Li Hong 真君李弘” were mixed together.⁷⁶ Ōfuchi Ninji and Shang Fei noted the process of fusion between Lord Lao and the Gold Portal Latter Saint. According to the record in *Zhenling Weiye Tu*, Shang Fei believed that Lord Lao and the Gold Portal Saint Lord were not considered the same deity in the recognition of Tao Hongjing, as they were separated and placed in different positions (Shang 2010, p. 211). *Shangqing Gaoshang Jinyuan Yuzhang Yuqing Yinshu* 上清高上金元羽章玉清隱書 (*Secret Writings of the Yuqing Heaven, Feathered Stanza from the Jinyuan Palace*) written in the later period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, stated: “Latter Saint Nine Mysteries Gold Portal Saint Lord, he descended to scholars of the Zhou Dynasty and changed his title to Laozi 後聖九玄金闕帝君, 下為周師, 改號老子”.⁷⁷ Based on this information, Ōfuchi Ninji concluded that the divine status of the Gold Portal Latter Saint had already merged with Lord Lao at a later period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Ōfuchi 1964, pp. 510–11). Actually, there were enough Daoist literature examples from the Southern and Northern Dynasties to Tang dynasties equating Lord Lao with the Gold Portal Latter Saint.⁷⁸

The combination of important deities could be resolved by the doctrine that the same deity appeared as different identities in different eras. However, there may be irreconcilable issues with regard to the division and description of the heavenly realms where these deities reside. For example, when the understanding that Lord Lao was equivalent to the Gold Portal Latter Saint was accepted, the holy domain that originally belonged to the Gold Portal Latter Saint would also become the domain of Lord Lao, and vice versa. But how can the same deity appear and rule over two different and distinct heavenly realms at the same time? The *Zhenling Weiye Tu* by Tao Hongjing did provide a description of the Gold Portal Latter Saint:

Right position of Highest Purity: Right Saint Gold Portal Emperor Dawn, Latter Saint Great Dao of Mystery and Prime will be born in this world in the year of Renchen. 上清右位:右聖金闕帝晨後聖玄元道君.壬辰當下生.⁷⁹

Middle position of the Supreme Pole: The Supreme Pole Gold Portal Emperor Lord. His surname is Li, and will descend in the year of Renchen and become the Lord of Great Peace. 太極中位:太極金闕帝君.姓李, 壬辰下教, 太平主.⁸⁰

The two “Gold Portals” mentioned here are obviously different. One was the original Latter Saint, while the other was mixed with the godhood of the True Lord Li Hong 李弘. If the blending of the Latter Saint and Lord Lao did not occur during the time of Tao Hongjing, it would not cause much confusion in the understanding of the structure of the immortal world when placing them in different celestial realms in the *Zhenling Weiye Tu*. However, by the time this book was re-edited by Lüqiu Fangyuan, such contradictions became very apparent. Where should Lord Lao reside? Is he in the Great Clarity Heaven, Supreme Pole Heaven, or perhaps in the Highest Purity Heaven where the Latter Saint Great Dao of Mystery and Prime was located? In fact, during Lüqiu Fangyuan’s day, the Daoist community had already reached a consensus on this matter. The widely accepted belief was that “Lord Lao governs Great Clarity Heaven”. Ultimately, the anxiety caused by materials such as *Zhenling Weiye Tu* did not lead Daoists into perpetual confusion about their beliefs.

4. Conclusions

The pursuit of the immortal realm is an endless journey for Daoist practitioners, which constitutes an important aspect of the Daoist cosmic concept. The Daoist cosmic concept accepted the traditional descriptions of the universe, but it also developed a unique and distinct hierarchy of the divine world. This divine world was a realm where deities reside and travel, and how to reasonably locate important deities in appropriate celestial realms was a crucial issue of the Daoist cosmological description. During the Han and Tang dynasties, various Daoist teachings on the heavenly realms emerged. Although some of these teachings were not fully developed and were subsequently abandoned without actually placing deities within them, others did evolve toward maturity. A deep observation of this process is highly attractive to modern scholars, but choosing an appropriate perspective or analytical approach to discover and present the complex context of this evolution remains a complicated issue that requires careful consideration. Observing the changes in the great deities' positions and locations may be an effective choice.

These deities carried rich information about beliefs, and the evolution of their interpretation could reveal the trends in the beliefs of the religious group behind them. The contradictions and harmonies hidden between different interpretations can demonstrate potential communication and interaction among different belief groups. Taking this approach, Lord Lao is undoubtedly a proper subject of study. Unlike the newly created deities such as Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning and the Lord of Great Tao of the Most High, the belief in Lord Lao had an earlier origin and was accepted and worshipped by more Daoist groups. Therefore, the issue of where Lord Lao resided involves multiple interpretations. Meanwhile, due to the traditional understanding of Lord Lao already having a fixed location, when practitioners later sought to innovate on the concept of Lord Lao's location, they would feel the anxiety and pressure of tradition. Thus, "creating the location of Lord Lao" and "searching for the location of Lord Lao" were parallel thought processes that were both consistent and conflicting. It is noteworthy that even after the emergence of the new view, the traditional beliefs sometimes did not completely disappear, but left behind certain details or legacies such as Kunlun, Purple Sublimity Palace, and Supreme Pole Heaven as mentioned earlier.

During the investigation of the complex issue involving Lord Lao's location, the focus shifted multiple times, from the Kunlun Mountain to the highest heaven Great Clarity Heaven, and the lowest heaven of the Three Clarity Domains, then to the constantly shifting position of the Purple Sublimity Palace, and the Supreme Pole Domain which was once considered as a feasible alternative member of the Three Clarity Domains. Between the Han and Tang dynasties, the ever-changing location of Lord Lao reflected the intense evolution of Daoist cosmic concept. The final result of Lord Lao being placed in the Great Clarity Heaven of the Three Clarity Domains reflected a temporary settling of the intense doctrinal evolution. Through an examination of Lord Lao's location, the core cosmological beliefs in Han and Tang Daoism can be delved into. Such a discussion would aid in delineating a more complete picture of the history of Daoist thought.

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Notes

- ¹ For the overall discussion of the evolution of Daoist cosmic concept (especially the view of the heavenly realm) between the Han and Tang dynasties, cf. (Schafer 1977; Mugitani 1988, pp. 54–73; Xiao 1989, pp. 207–648; W. Sun 2016; Lu 2018b; and others).
- ² Zhen Luan, and Xiaodao Lun. 148a. In the same work, Zhen Luan once again ridiculed the location of the Lord of the Great Dao of the Most High, pointing to the inconsistency between the ritual practice and the classic narrative in Daoist tradition. See *Xiaodao Lun*, p. 149c.
- ³ Y. Liu (2005), For more focused research, see (Kikuchi 2002; Kusuyama 1979).
- ⁴ The transformation of Laozi's divinity was not a simple linear progression. Criticism towards the overemphasis on Laozi's sacred status was not limited to those outside of Daoist tradition, as some practitioners also expressed dissenting views. As Ge Hong (葛洪) straightforwardly stated, "as for Laozi, he was particularly adept at attaining the Dao, inwardly genuine and natural. To properly understand his life, one should rely on historical records as well as immortal and secret texts to cross-reference. Other folk views are full of falsehoods. The later Daoist priests have added their own embellishments, which are not authentic teachings". See Li Fang ed., *Taiping Yulan*, p. 659.2943b.
- ⁵ The Kunlun belief system in the Han dynasty and its subsequent adoption by Daoism, Cf. (Sofukawa 1979; Xian 2006; Luo 2020; G. Wang 2022, etc.).
- ⁶ The brief summary of the relationship between Queen Mother of the West and Kunlun, see (L. Michael 1979). The research on Queen Mother of the West is extremely rich. A comprehensive review can be found in (Q. Zhang 2013, pp. 1–38).
- ⁷ A brief discussion on the research approaches of Kunlun can be found in (L. Gao 2019). For more significant works on the study of Kunlun, see (Y. Wang 2020; T. Michael 2016; Feng 2022).
- ⁸ Research on the Queen Mother of the West is quite rich, Zhang Qin has contributed to this field his *Wenhua Renleixue Shiye Xiade Xiawangmu Shenhua Chuanshuo Yanjiu* (Q. Zhang 2013, pp. 1–38).
- ⁹ There have been many studies on *Xiang'er Zhu*, cf. (Mugitani 2013, pp. 1–42), translated by Li Heshu.
- ¹⁰ Rao Zongyi, *Laozi Xiang'er Zhu Jiao Zheng*, p. 12.
- ¹¹ Regarding the twenty-four dioceses system of the Heavenly Master Daoism, see (C. Wang 1996). For information on the organizational system of the early Heavenly Master Daoism, cf. (Kleeman 2016).
- ¹² It should be noted that a material in Ge Hong's (葛洪) *Baopuzi Neipian* 抱朴子內篇 [Book of the Master Who Keeps to Simplicity, Inner Chapters] is often used as early evidence of Lord Lao's governance of Kunlun, but the interpretation of this material is questionable. According to Ge Hong's record, Cai Dan 蔡誕 became an earth immortal with a lowly status and was driven by higher-ranking deities. He was responsible for tending Lord Lao's dragons, but due to negligence, he lost the Five-color dragon Lord Lao often rode. As a result, he was punished and sent to work as a farmer under Kunlun Mountain. Later, when Cai Dan returned home, he claimed that he came from Kunlun and stated that the sacred realm of Kunlun is not accessible without Lord Lao's talisman. See (M. Wang 1986, pp. 349–50). Some scholars linked Lord Lao's information in Cai Dan's story with the statement "Laojun governs Kunlun" in *Xiang'er Zhu* and argue that both reflect the same idea that Lord Lao resides in and rules over Kunlun. However, in this story, there is no necessary connection between Lord Lao and "ruling over Kunlun". If Lord Lao was situated on a higher plane in the immortal realm, he should still have the power to banish Cai Dan to cultivate land at the foot of Kunlun Mountain.
- ¹³ On Kou Qianzhi, Cf. (Wei 1974, 114.3049–3054; Y. Chen 2001, pp. 120–58; Zhong 2005, pp. 436–524; Y. Liu 2002, pp. 271–81).
- ¹⁴ *Laojun Yinsong Jie Jing*, in *Daozang*, DZ 785, vol. 18, pp. 211c, 212a.
- ¹⁵ For overview and academic Understanding of *Santian Nei Jiejing* 三天內解經, Cf. (Jin 2014, pp. 5–6; G. Li 2017, pp. 13–21).
- ¹⁶ *Santiannei Jiejing*, in *Daozang*, DZ 1205, vol. 28, p. 414b.
- ¹⁷ Yamada (1999, p. 220). Due to the discovery of Dunhuang manuscripts and other reasons, the international academic community has paid more attention to the *Shengxuan Jing*. For related research, refer to (Liu 2011, pp. 117–213).
- ¹⁸ Wang Xuanhe, *Shangqing Daolei Shixiang*, in *Daozang*, DZ 1132, vol. 24, p. 876c.
- ¹⁹ *Zhengyi Fawen Falubu Yi*, in *Daozang*, vol. 32, 200c. (Lü 2011, p. 9).
- ²⁰ *Baopuzi Neipian Jiaoshi*, p. 4.76.
- ²¹ Pan Shizheng, *Daomen Jingfa Xiangcheng Cixu*, in *Daozang*, DZ 1128, vol. 24, p. 797a.
- ²² Xie Shouhao, *Taishang Hunyuan Laozi Shilue*, in *Daozang*, DZ 773, vol. 17, p. 902a.
- ²³ Meng Anpai, *Dajiao Yishu* 道教義樞, in *Daozang*, DZ 1129, vol. 24, p. 811a.
- ²⁴ Wang Yu 王煜, "Kunlun, Tianmen, Xi Wangmu Yu Tiandi", pp. 59–60.
- ²⁵ "Laozi Huahu Jing Xu", in (J. Zhang 2004, vol. 8, p. 186b).
- ²⁶ Shi Chongxuan, *Yiqie Daojing Yinyi Miaomen Youqi*, in *Daozang*, DZ 1123, vol. 24, p. 725c.
- ²⁷ Xie Shouhao, *Taishang Hunyuan Laozi Shilue*, in *Daozang*, DZ 773, vol. 17, p. 893c.
- ²⁸ Du Daojian, *Xuanjing Yuanzhi Fahui*, in *Daozang*, DZ 703, vol. 12, p. 771b.

- For Daoist Integration from the Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties, see (Bai 2018).
- Regarding the formation process of the “Thirty-Six Heavenly”, in addition to the research conducted by Lu Min, Sun Weijie, Xiao Dengfu, and Mugitani Kunio, there are also works by (Zeng 1993, pp. 41–43, 59; H. Wang 2017, pp. 73–89; W. Sun 2022, pp. 33–45, etc.).
- Yunji Qiqian, p. 3.36.
- A systematic introduction to the classification of the *Daozang*, see (G. Chen 1963, pp. 1–104).
- There has been much discussion about the Great Clarity classics and alchemy. The discussions surrounding the literature, chemistry, and cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries have been particularly intense. Internationally renowned scholars such as Joseph Needham, Nathan Sivin, and Chen Guofu have all written specialized books on this subject. More recent summaries and discussions can be found in (Han 2009, 2015, 2022, pp. 49–236).
- Baopuzi Neipian Jiaoshi, 4.71. Fabrizio Pregadio believed that the Great Clarity tradition originated around 200 AD. in the Anhui region of China, and quickly spread to neighboring areas across the Yangtze River. See his *Great Clarity*, pp. 5–6.
- Baopuzi Neipian Jiaoshi, p. 15.275.
- Baopuzi Neipian Jiaoshi, p. 3.52.
- Regarding the relevant works of these scholars, see (He 2015, pp. 29–30).
- Taishang Laojun Zhongjing, in *Daozang*, DZ 1168, vol. 27, p. 142b.
- Taishang Laojun Zhongjing, in *Daozang*, DZ 1168, vol. 27, p. 143a–b.
- Fabrizio Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, pp. 43–44.
- Taishang Laojun Zhongjing, in *Daozang*, DZ 1168, vol. 27, p. 143ab.
- Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen ed., *The Daoist Canon*, pp. 159–60.
- Dongzhen Taiyi Dijun Taidan Yinshu Dongzhen Xuanjing, in *Daozang*, DZ 1330, vol. 33, p. 533b.
- Gao Tonglin pointed out that during the Sui and Tang dynasties, the *Laozi Zhongjing* was called *Laozi Lizang Zhongjing* 老子歷藏中經, and it was also attributed as a classic taught by Laozi. This point can be found in his “*Laozi Zhongjing Xintan*”, pp. 106–31.
- Yunji Qiqian, pp. 6.98–100.
- In early literature, Zhang Daoling had “two faces”. One was the Patriarch Heavenly Master created by the teaching of the Orthodox and One Covenant with the Powers, while the other was an alchemist. These two different faces were eventually merged in the mythological biography of Zhang Daoling. See (C. Liu 2000, pp. 67–136; Y. Liu 2010, pp. 113–36, 137–56; Goossaert 2022, pp. 13–32) Han Jishao, “Cong Laozi Xiang’er Zhu dao Liandanjia Zhang Daoling” 從《老子想爾注》到煉丹家張道陵 [From Laozi Xiang’er Zhu to Alchemist Zhang Daoling], in his *Woming Zaiwo*, pp. 205–21, etc.
- See Du Guangting *Jizhuan Shizhong Jijiao*, pp. 569–75.
- Lu Min, “Jintang Daojiao Tianjiegua Yanjiu”, pp. 66–68.
- Shangqing Taishang Kaitian Longqiao Jing, in *Daozang*, DZ 1354, vol. 33, p. 738b.
- Yunji Qiqian, pp. 24.303–304. I translated “時號” as “be known as”, but the original expression seems to be wrong. These palaces should be the residences of Three Treasure Lords, but not their alternative names.
- Pan Shizheng, *Daomen Jingfa Xiangcheng Cixu*, pp. 782c, 784a.
- Wang Xuanhe, *Sandong Zhunang*, in *Daozang*, DZ 1139, vol. 25, p. 340c.
- Du Guangting, *Daode Zhenjing Guangshengyi*, in *Daozang*, DZ 725, vol. 14, p. 318c.
- Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 (1025–1094), *Yuanshi Wuliang Duren Shangpin Miaojing Sizhu* 元始無量度人上品妙經四注 [Four Commentaries on the Book of Salvation], in *Daozang*, DZ 87, vol. 2, p. 240a.
- Zhen Luan, *Zhen Zheng Lun* 甄正論, in *Taisho Tripitaka*, T. 2112, vol. 52, p. 561a.
- Wei Shou, *Wei Shu*, p. 141.3048.
- Wushang Miyao, p. 22.282.
- Wushang Miyao, pp. 22.268–275.
- Taishang Dongxuan Lingbao Yebao Yinyuan Jing, in *Daozang*, DZ 336, vol. 6, pp. 128c–29a.
- Dongxuan Lingbao Yujing Shan Buxu Jing, in *Daozang*, DZ 1439, vol. 34, p. 625b.
- Taishang Dongxuan Lingbao Zhihui Zuigen Shangpin Dajie Jing, in *Daozang*, DZ 457, vol. 6, p. 895a.
- Lu Xiujing, *Dongxuan Lingbao Zhaishuo Guangzhu Jiefa Deng Zhuyuan Yi*, in *Daozang*, DZ 524, vol. 9, p. 824b.
- Dongxuan Lingbao Ziran Jiutiansheng Shenzhang Jing, in *Daozang*, DZ 318, vol. 5, p. 843c.
- Taishang Lingbao Hongfu Miezui Xiangming Jing, in *Daozang*, DZ 377, vol. 6, p. 292c.
- Qiyu Xiuzhen Zhengpin Tu, in *Daozang*, DZ 433, vol. 6, p. 695b–c.
- Taishang Dongshen Sanyuan Miaoben Fushou Zhenjing, in *Daozang*, DZ 651, vol. 11, p. 414a.
- Xie Shouhao, *Hunyuan Shengji*, in *Daozang*, DZ 770, vol. 17, p. 789b.

- 68 Wushang Miyao, pp. 78.977–100284.
- 69 Wushang Miyao, p. 6.84.
- 70 Lu Min, “Jintang Daojiao Tianjieguan Yanjiu”, pp. 71–72.
- 71 Wang Xuanhe, *Sandong Zhunang*, p. 354c.
- 72 Taiji Zuoxiangong Qingwenjing, in (D. Li 1999, p. 2315).
- 73 Zhenling Weiye Tu Jiaoli, p. 138.
- 74 The most systematic Daoist scripture about the Gold Portal Latter Saint is *Shangqing Housheng Daojun Lieji* 上清後聖道君列紀, in *Daozang*, DZ 442, vol. 6, pp. 744b–48b. According to the hypothesis of Kobayashi Masayoshi, this text was likely written after 364 CE and possibly after 371 CE. See Masami Kobayashi, *Rikuchō Dōkyōshi Kenkyū*, pp. 436–37; more about the Messianism of medieval Daoism, see pp. 403–82.
- 75 The relevant research has been quite abundant, besides Masami Kobayashi’s work, also Cf. (Anna 1970, pp. 216–47; Mollier 1990; Bokenkamp 1994, pp. 59–88; F. Li 1996b, pp. 137–60; F. Li 1996a, pp. 82–99; F. Li 1996c, pp. 91–130; Campany 2002, pp. 194–211); Sun Yinggang 孫英剛, “Jindao Zhichen” 金刀之讖 [The Golden Sword Prophecy], in his *Shenwen Shidai*, pp. 134–64, etc.
- 76 E Zürcher, “Eschatology and Messianism in Early Chinese Buddhism”, in Idema (1981, p. 37).
- 77 *Shangqing Gaoshang Jinyuan Yuzhang Yuqing Yinshu*, in *Daozang*, DZ 1358, vol. 33, p. 780b.
- 78 Ge Hong, *Yuanshi Shangzhen Zhongxian Ji* 元始上真眾仙記 [Register of Primordial Beginning, the Superior Perfects and Hosts of the Immortals], in *Daozang*, DZ 166, vol. 3, p. 270a; Pan Shizheng, *Daomen Jingfa Xiangcheng Cixu*, p. 796b-c; J. Chen (1988, p. 240a).
- 79 Zhenling Weiye Tu Jiaoli, p. 54.
- 80 Zhenling Weiye Tu Jiaoli, p. 86.

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