

## Article

# Writing and Worship in Deng Zhimo's *Saints Trilogy*

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**Abstract:** Around the turn of the seventeenth century, the prolific writer-editor Deng Zhimo produced three illustrated books narrating the lives of Lü Dongbin (*The Flying Sword*), Xu Xun (*The Iron Tree*), and Sa Shoujian (*The Enchanted Date*). This article focuses on the textual hybridity of Deng Zhimo's hagiographic *Saints Trilogy* and argues that it offers encyclopedic, practical, and entertaining guidebooks for worshipping the three immortals and pursuing Daoist attainment. The cultic lore woven into the fabric of Deng's *Saints Trilogy* reflects the important contribution of authors and publishers to popular reverence, highlighting the close interplay between "literature" and "religion" in late-imperial China.

**Keywords:** Chinese religions; Chinese literature; Ming; Deng Zhimo; hagiography; Lü Dongbin; Xu Xun; Sa Shoujian; print culture; Daoism

## 1. Introduction

In his preface to *The Enchanted Date*, a long prose narrative recounting the life of the immortal Sa Shoujian 薩守堅, the author-editor Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨 stresses that this book is not only intended for adepts who devote themselves to the Daoist path, but also for "those who wish to cultivate their minds and revere the gods". His book, Deng claims, is the fruit of meticulous research whose goal is to present the "true traces of the immortal". Indeed, *The Enchanted Date*, published in 1603, is not only the first comprehensive hagiography of Sa Shoujian, but it is unprecedented in its encyclopedic scope, weaving historiography, hagiography, and ritual practice into the fabric of the immortal's life story.

This book joins two other narratives by Deng Zhimo published around the same time: *The Iron Tree*, devoted to the Daoist patriarch Xu Xun 許遜, and *The Flying Sword*, celebrating the famous immortal-bard Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓. The three books, which I refer to collectively as Deng Zhimo's *Saints Trilogy*, offer informative and entertaining retellings of the three immortals' life stories that serve as vehicles for their veneration. The three books of the *Saints Trilogy* are composite texts that incorporate a variety of materials, ranging from canonical instructions for Daoist inner-alchemy to poems and folktales, within the framework of long "vernacular" narrative-texts (*xiaoshuo*). In its multitextuality (Bisetto 2012, pp. 917–25), the *Saints Trilogy* bridges the realms of book culture and cultic reverence. Similarly to contemporaneous "paraliterary" narrative-texts that grew out of reverential and ritual contexts, the *Saints Trilogy* should likewise be understood as part of a larger, predominantly lay, hagiographic repertoire, and as such, its book consumption challenges narrow definitions of "reading" (see Cedzich 1995; Meulenbeld 2007, 2015; Shahar 1998, 2015).

This paper examines the multitextuality of the *Saints Trilogy* in the context of late-Ming publishing.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Deng Zhimo's intertextual practices in the *Saints Trilogy* reflect a conscious attempt to produce comprehensive portfolios of the three immortals that would allow readers to "follow in the footsteps of the immortals", as Deng phrased it. By repackaging the hagiographies of the three immortals and reinterpreting the teachings that were associated with their lore, Deng Zhimo presented



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a renewed vision of Xu Xun, Sa Shoujian, and Lü Dongbin as miracle-working masters of inner alchemy who protect humanity from natural and demonic threats. As guidebooks for the immortals' lore and the doctrinal teachings that came to be associated with them, the *Saints Trilogy* offered resources for the immortals' reverence and inspiration for the pursuit of spiritual cultivation. In this respect, the *Saints Trilogy* shines a valuable light on the unique role of the commercial publishing industry in shaping the discourse on the lore and reverence of cultic figures through producing, reframing, and disseminating knowledge in late-imperial China.

## 2. The Saints Trilogy

The three books I refer to here collectively as the *Saints Trilogy* were published in the early years of the seventeenth century by the Cuiqing tang 萃慶堂 publishing house in Jianyang 建陽, Fujian Province. They are of similar length and share a common format, opening with a handwritten preface by Deng Zhimo, followed by a table of contents and a cover page noting the names of the author and the publisher (see Figures 1 and 2). All three books contain eleven rows of printed text in a single register, as well as several full-page illustrations that depict key episodes (Figures 3–5) and portraits of the immortals (Figure 6). In language and style of narration, the *Saints Trilogy* conforms to the conventions of the Wanli-era (1572–1620) “vernacular” prose-narrative writing mode (problematically referred to as *xiaoshuo* or *zhanghui xiaoshuo*; see Berg (2003, pp. 176–88), Chen (1993, pp. 2–32), Hanan (1981), Hegel (1981), Idema (1974), and Shang (2014, pp. 258–62). The format and themes of the *Saints Trilogy* place it among several dozen late-Ming *xiaoshuo* works classified by Sun Kaidi as *lingguai xiaoshuo*, or “supernatural narratives” (Sun 1933). Shahar divides this category into two groups: hagiographic works centering on one deity, and large-scale narratives sporting an extensive array of divine protagonists (Shahar 1998, pp. 8–11). The books of the *Saints Trilogy* belong to the first category of narratives, which I termed “origin narratives” elsewhere (Ganany 2018), a subgenre whose profound impact on Chinese culture in the past four centuries is yet to be thoroughly explored (a task which I am undertaking in my current book project).

Deng Zhimo's captivating retelling of the three immortals' lives diverges from the lackluster tone of his source-material, dramatizing the events and personages that populate their hagiographical traditions. The chronological “grocery lists” of earlier hagiographies is transformed beyond recognition by the *Trilogy's* vivid descriptions, flashbacks, dialogs, and verse, the vast majority of which penned by Deng himself. It is unclear whether Deng conceived of the three books as separate projects, a trilogy, or parts of a longer series that he did not develop further. In any case, the three books stand apart from the rest of the corpus of Deng's works as the only full-length narratives that he had authored independently (Bai 2005, pp. 27–31; Chen 2012, pp. 132–39).

The narrative dedicated to Xu Xun was published in 1603 under the title *Newly Carved Narrative of the Jin-era Xu of Jingyang Attaining the Dao and Capturing the Dragon, the Iron Tree* (*Xin qie Jindai Xu Jingyang dedao qin jiao tieshu ji* 新鐫晉代許旌陽得道擒蛟鐵樹記; Deng 1603a) by Yu Siquan 余泗泉 (Yu Zhangde 余彰德), who was a prominent publisher during the Wanli era and a cousin of the famous publisher Yu Xiangdou 余象斗. The book must have won considerable commercial success, as it was reprinted by the same publisher in the following year (1604), and once more in the second half of the seventeenth century by the Zhengsheng tang 正聲堂 publishing house. The commercial success of *The Iron Tree* might be credited, at least in part, to the vibrancy of Xu Xun reverence around the turn of the seventeenth century, particularly in Jiangxi and Fujian. A multifaceted icon, Xu Xun has been worshiped as a local saint and a water deity in the Xishan 西山 region of Jiangxi since the Six Dynasties period at the latest.<sup>2</sup> Xu Xun was gradually appropriated by the Jingming Daoist sect 淨明 (also known as Filial Daoism, *xiaodao* 孝道) and the Lüshan 閩山 Daoist sect, a local movement originating in Northern Fujian that was inspired by Jingming and Zhengyi Daoism and

adopted Xu Xun as one of its leading patriarchs (Akizuki 1978, pp. 248–49; Ang 2016, pp. 197–218; Boltz 1987, pp. 70–78; Huang 1973, pp. 43–75; Li 1997, pp. 14–17).<sup>3</sup>

豫章鐵樹記引

許都仙江南人也厥祖累世陰德  
 都仙以西晉初誕邈其自蓋玉洞  
 仙降世豈憂懋鳥者說哉都仙  
 幼穎異長舉孝慮擢旌陽縣令赫  
 有政聲惟以五胡併亂遂解簪紳

Figure 1. The first page of Deng Zhimo’s preface to *The Iron Tree*, 1603.

鐵樹代呂純陽得道飛劍記卷之上

文邑竹溪散人 鄧氏編  
 閩書林萃齋堂 余氏梓

第一回  
 諸仙朝玉皇大帝 慧童投呂家出世

詩曰  
 讀蘇殘編細品論 看來世第未全均 駭今有壽類今天  
 崇也繁華范也貪 自信光陰為過客 常思富貴等浮雲  
 人生適意須行樂 且看東遊呂洞賓

每自鴻濛一判天地攸分天上就起有神仙居於三十三天  
 下就生有黎庶居於九州之地怎麼叫做三十三天曰福塵天

Figure 2. First page of *The Flying Sword*.

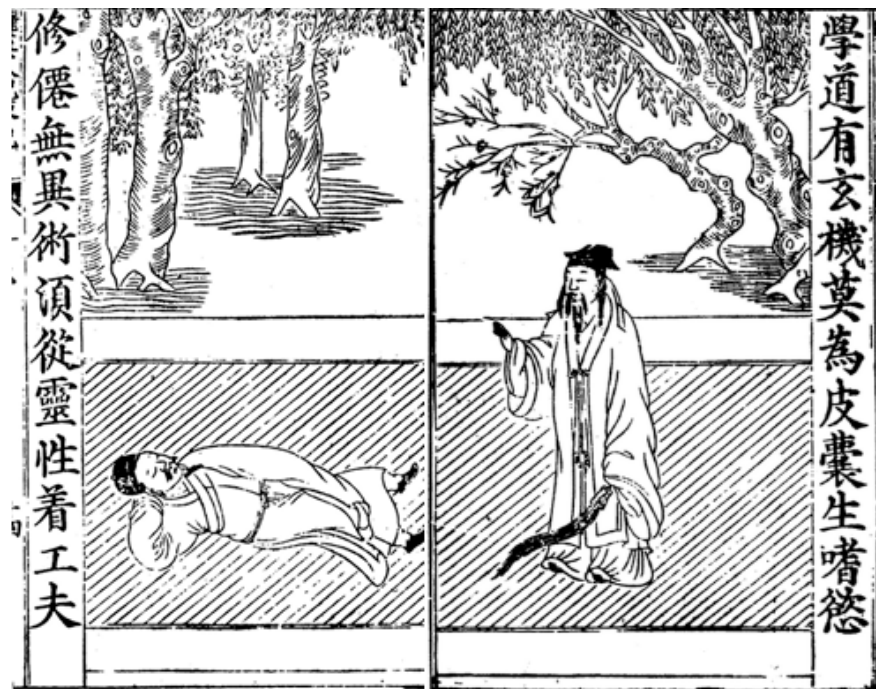


Figure 3. Seeking the Dao in *The Enchanted Date*, 1603.

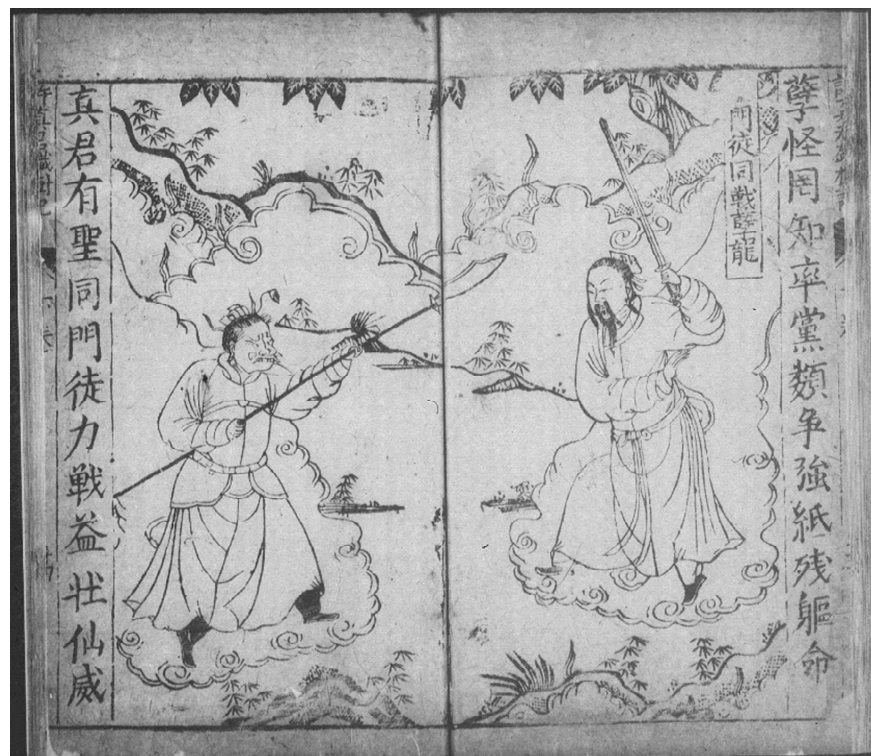


Figure 4. Xu Xun fights the dragon of Poyang Lake, *The Iron Tree*, 1604 edition.



Figure 5. Lü Dongbin confronts a dragon in *The Flying Sword*.



Figure 6. A portrait of Sa Shoujian in *The Enchanted Date*, 1603.

Xu Xun was the focus of a rich hagiographic tradition in the centuries prior to the publication of *The Iron Tree*. Among Xu Xun's most notable extant hagiographies are the *Xiaodao Wu Xu er zhenjun zhuan* 孝道吳許二真君傳 (DZ 449), *Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan* 旌陽許真君傳 by the famous Song-Dynasty Daoist thinker Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾, the *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑 by Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (DZ 296), the

episodic *Xishan Xu zhenjun bashiwu hua lu* 西山許真君八十五化錄 (DZ 448), the pictorial hagiography *Xutaishi zhenjun tuzhuan* 許太史真君圖傳 (DZ 440),<sup>4</sup> and the *Jingming daoshi Jingyang Xu zhenjun* 淨明道師旌陽許真君, included in the *Jingming zhongxiao quanshu* 淨明忠孝全書 (DZ 1110). Xu Xun's early hagiographies describe him as a native of Yuzhang County 豫章縣 in Jiangxi who lived during the Jin Dynasty (265–420) and served as magistrate of Jingyang (arguably in Sichuan). His role as a water deity who protects against floods, droughts, and water-borne epidemics eclipsed other aspects of his lore by the Song Dynasty.<sup>5</sup> It was also during this transformative period that Xu Xun's association with the Jingming sect became a key element in his cultic reverence. The geographical proximity of Xu Xun's cult center to the heart of the Jingming sect in the Xishan region of Jiangxi is most likely the reason for his appropriation. The geographical origins of the Jingming Dao in the Xishan area also shed light on its early ties to inner alchemy. The Tang alchemist-poet Shi Jianwu 施肩吾 (fl. 820–835) became a part of the Xishan lore along with his preceptors Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin, particularly in the *Xishan qun xian hui zhen ji* 西山群仙會真記, the third most important text in the Zhong-Lü corpus, to whom it is attributed.<sup>6</sup> Although a thorough treatment of Jingming Daoism lies beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy here that Jingming Daoist practices draw on Shangqing and Tianshi Daoism, especially in its usages of talismans and charms, as well as on Buddhism (Guo 2005, pp. 25, 188). Moreover, from the earliest stages of its formation, Jingming Daoism maintained a close connection to the Lingbao liturgical tradition. Du Guangting concluded his hagiography of Chenmu, one of Xu Xun's spiritual progenitors, by noting that "the ritual of the Way of Filial Piety is little different from that of the Ling-pao [tradition]. The people of Yu-chang have been practicing it for generations" (Schipper 1985, p. 827). Indeed, the earliest hagiography of Xu Xun that survives intact, the supposedly Tang-dynasty *Xiaodao Wu Xu er zhenjun zhuan*, describes the rituals conducted during the anniversary of the ascent of Xu Xun, including lists of important dates and offerings, as a standardized Lingbao ritual. The Southern Song liturgist Jin Yunzhong 金允中 (fl. circa 1224) not only saw the Jingming Dao and Xu Xun worship as an integral part of the Lingbao liturgical tradition, but even regarded it as its crowning achievement.

Late Ming saw a growing engagement of writers, artists, and commercial publishers with the Xu Xun lore and his association with Jingming Daoism. One interesting example from this period is the *Zhenxian shiji* 真仙事跡, an exquisite pictorial hagiography of Xu Xun dating 1546, which was compiled by Zhu Gonggui 朱拱樞 of Yiyang 弋陽, Jiangxi, and includes sixty paintings by the artist Xie Shichen 謝時臣. This album, which seems to have been prepared as a gift for the Jiajing Emperor, a great patron of Daoism, relies heavily on canonical sources, and particularly the aforementioned *Xutaishi zhenjun tuzhuan*.<sup>7</sup> In 1604, only a year after the first edition of Deng Zhimo's *The Iron Tree*, the writer-editor-publisher Yang Erzeng produced a Jingming collection of texts relating to Xu Xun, titled *Xu zhenjun Jingming zongjiao lu* 許真君淨明宗教錄 (Yang 2007, p. xxiv; Chen and Zou 2009). *The Iron Tree* positions itself as indebted to Xu Xun's existing hagiographical and doctrinal traditions, and as consciously contributing to them. While the impact of local folklore and oral traditions on the composition of *The Iron Tree* remains a matter for speculation, it is very likely that Deng Zhimo, a native of the Poyang Lake region, also drew on his own personal experiences with the Xu Xun cult and lore.<sup>8</sup> As discussed below, *The Iron Tree* stands out in this context in its ambitious attempt to create a comprehensive yet entertaining depiction of Xu Xun and his cult for a lay audience that seeks to consolidate the disparate aspects of his lore, from his role as a water deity and saintly miracle-worker to his post as the righteous magistrate of Jingyang 旌陽 and a paragon of filial piety who is destined to eventually take his place in the divine realm as a Daoist immortal.

The narrative recounting the life of the immortal Sa Shoujian, titled *The Story of the Perfected Sa of the Five Dynasties Attaining the Dao, the Enchanted Date* (*Wudai Sa zhenren dedao Zhouzao ji* 五代薩真人得道咒棗記, [Deng 1603b](#)), was likewise published in 1603 by the Cuiqing tang. Sa Shoujian (supposedly circa 1141–1178?) has been revered as a Daoist saint, an exorcist, and a miracle worker since the Song Dynasty, and became especially central in the Xihe 西河 Daoist sect, a branch of the Shenxiao 神霄 school ([Boltz 2008](#), pp. 825–26; [Goossaert 2021](#), pp. 149–62; [Li 1997](#), pp. 207–86; [Xiong 2016](#), pp. 41–49). His cult enjoyed particular exuberance during the Ming, when it was also officially recognized and supported by the imperial court. Although Sa Shoujian was the subject of several brief hagiographies in preceding centuries, none is as long, comprehensive, and engaging as Deng Zhimo's *The Enchanted Date*.<sup>9</sup> Deng's work portrays Sa Shoujian not only as an exorcist who effectively uses Thunder Rites to protect mankind, but also brings his persona in line with the current demands of an immortal-saint, shared by the *Trilogy* and contemporaneous works: the virtuous adept who masters the secrets of inner alchemy on the one hand, and the arts of demonic subjugation on the other. In the course of the somewhat formulaic and repetitive *The Enchanted Date*, Sa Shoujian provides a range of services to the people he encounters, from protection against malevolent spirits and human corruption, through curing hunger and illness, to reviving the dead. Sa Shoujian's holiness is epitomized in his didactic journey through the netherworld, which concludes with his performance of mortuary rites informed by Buddhist and Daoist practices ([Durand-Dastès 2016](#), pp. 53–56; [Ganany 2021](#), pp. 159–67).

The exact publication date of the narrative devoted to Lü Dongbin, titled *The Story of Lü Chunyang of the Tang Attaining the Dao, the Flying Sword* (*Tangdai Lü Chunyang dedao Feijian ji* 唐代呂純陽得道飛劍記, [Deng n.d.](#)), is not included in the extant first edition printed by the Cuiqing tang, but judging by its content and paratextual characteristics, it is very likely that it was also produced circa 1603. Lü Dongbin was undoubtedly the most celebrated and versatile among the three immortals of Deng's *Trilogy* at the time of publication, and his lore remains the most extensively researched by modern scholars (see for instance, [Ang 1993, 1997](#); [Baldrian-Hussein 1986](#); [Eskildsen 1989](#); [Katz 1999](#); [Ma 1989](#)). A kaleidoscopic cultural icon, Lü Dongbin has been portrayed as a bard, a drunkard, a Daoist adept, a Buddhist, a mendicant ink seller, a calligrapher, a healer, a merchant, an artisan, and a patriarch of the Quanzhen sect and the Zhong-Lü school, among many other images. *The Flying Sword* weaves many of these portrayals into Lü's life story, while asserting his centrality in the Quanzhen lineage and his importance as a master of inner alchemy. The episodic-yet-unified structure of *The Flying Sword* provided a convenient canvas for Deng to include various unrelated legends about Lü. The plotline of *The Flying Sword* centers on the spiritual deliverance (*du* 度) of Lü Dongbin by Zhongli Quan through inner alchemy. Notwithstanding his seemingly successful spiritual attainment under Zhongli Quan's tutelage, Lü Dongbin's divine canonization is conditioned upon Lü's deliverance of others. Lü's attempts to deliver the people he encounters in the course of his journeys in the human realm form the core of the narrative. These encounters, essentially a series of loosely tied tales, showcase some of Lü Dongbin's trademark traits: carefree roaming between heaven and Earth, composing poetry, consuming legendary quantities of wine, making miracles, and carousing with women. Deng Zhimo weaves tales of exorcistic subjugation into this tapestry, thus bringing Lü Dongbin's life story in line with the contemporaneous hagiographic vision of an immortal saint. It is only in the final chapter of the narrative that Lü succeeds in delivering a person, the female immortal He Xiangnu 何仙姑, with whom he travels to Zhongnan Mountain 終南山 to join the other members of the Eight Immortals (*baxian* 八仙).<sup>10</sup>

As their titles indicate, the main concern of the *Saints Trilogy* is the attainment of the Dao (*dedao* 得道), or achieving spiritual realization, that is, “transcendence” or “immortality” (*xian-hood*, as [Campany](#) aptly refers to it; see [Campany 2002](#), pp. 4–5). The

issue of distinguishing this realized state of *xian*-hood and those who have reached it from the common or mundane (*fan* 凡) looms large in the *Trilogy*. The pursuit of Daoist attainment takes on various forms in the course of the three narratives, but they can be broadly divided into two categories: self-cultivation and altruistic action. “Cultivation” is, of course, a generic term that does not do justice to the range of practices depicted in the *Trilogy*: moments of instruction and master-disciple exchanges, tests, and trials, descriptions of inner-chemical methods, the conversion of others, and divine canonization. In this category, the protagonists of the *Trilogy* offer three different models of *xian*-hood that diverge on the question of asceticism as precondition for attainment. Sa Shoujian occupies one end of the spectrum as the saintly ascetic who completely detaches himself from all worldly associations. At the other end of the spectrum, we find Xu Xun, the virtuous official and devoted family man who eventually ascends to heaven with his entire household (including livestock!). Lü Dongbin of *The Flying Sword* is the most complicated case of the three, as he travels across this spectrum of asceticism, sometimes withdrawing from society but at other times succumbing to temptation and even using sexual intercourse for cultivation purposes. In this case, Deng’s attempt to consolidate the different images of the multifaceted Lü Dongbin lore while still striving to create an all-inclusive hagiographical portrait of the immortal reaches its limit.

Notwithstanding their different approaches to the issue of asceticism as a prerequisite for Daoist attainment, all three models are conditioned upon altruistic action, that is, the numerous services the three immortals offer mankind, primarily through miracles, random virtuous acts, and exorcistic subjugation of the demonic.<sup>11</sup> Among them, exorcism is particularly crucial, as it plays a double role as a demonstration of the protagonist’s efficacy as a protective deity (hence worthy of worship) and as an allegory for self-cultivation. This duality is corporealized in the objects-cum-emblems that the three immortals’ use to help mankind, as indicated in the titles of the narratives: Xu Xun’s iron tree, Sa Shoujian’s magical date, and Lü Dongbin’s flying sword. The successful mastering of both altruism and self-cultivation is the key to Daoist attainment in the hagiographical vision of the *Trilogy*.

*The Iron Tree*, *The Enchanted Date*, and *The Flying Sword* not only narrate the life-stories of the three immortals in great detail, but also situate them within larger cosmological, historical, geographical, and religious contexts. The basic framework of the *Trilogy* evokes the cosmological outline which characterizes contemporaneous hagiographical narratives around the turn of the seventeenth century (Bai 2005; Ganany 2018; Li 1997; Shahar 1998). Works in this sub-genre begin with a prophecy or a scene in the divine realm that outlines the rationale for the protagonist’s descent to the human world, and end with the ascendance or canonization of the protagonist. This framing mechanism builds on the trope of the “banished immortal” (*zhexian* 謫仙) that began circulating as early as the Tang Dynasty and became particularly prominent in late-imperial narrative writing (Li 1993, pp. 6–78; Li 2003, pp. 85–86).

In *The Flying Sword*, for instance, the narrative opens with a creation myth that lists the thirty-three heavens and nine earthly counties, followed by a lengthy description of the palace of the Jade Emperor. Lü Dongbin is introduced briefly as an immortal deity (*shenxian* 神仙) of the Tang Dynasty, before the narrative briskly turns to focus on a divine banquet scene. While his master Zhongli Quan converses with the Jade Emperor, Lü Dongbin, then still a disciple, idles outside the heavenly gates and catches sight of the wonders of the human realm. Overcome with temptation (literally “setting his mind on the mundane”, *fanxin* 凡心), Lü descends to enjoy the pleasures of the world of dust. After his long journey on the path toward self-realization through the conversion of others, Lü finally re-ascends to the divine court of the Jade Emperor, who grants Lü Dongbin and He Xiangyu celestial posts.

In a similar fashion, the first three chapters of *The Iron Tree* present a “prehistory” of Xu Xun. *The Iron Tree* begins by introducing Confucius, the Buddha, and Laozi and

the Three Teachings while arguing for the supremacy of Daoism. The focus remains on Laozi as the narrative turns to describe a banquet in his honour in the divine realm, in the course of which the gods discuss a prophecy foretelling the emergence of a dangerous dragon in the human realm. Laozi predicts the future arrival of Xu Xun who will be able to subjugate this malevolent demon. Laozi joins other deities in petitioning the Jade Emperor to send a celestial envoy to the human world to set in motion a chain of events that will eventually lead to Xu Xun's predestined vanquishing of the dragon. This opening not only sets the stage for Xu Xun's origin story, but it also highlights the iconic climax of the narrative, the subjugation of the Poyang Lake dragon in Chapter 14, which acts as a rite of passage and paves the way for Xu Xun's canonization in the last chapter.

Using a similar framing mechanism, *The Enchanted Date* begins with a cosmological description of the universe as constructed of three main elements: heaven, Earth, and man. Focusing on the latter category, the first chapter divides humanity by profession, then turns to discuss adepts who pursue immortality through self-cultivation. The rest of the chapter is devoted to Sa Shoujian's previous incarnations, forming a trajectory of gradual spiritual progression toward sainthood.<sup>12</sup> It recounts that in one of his previous incarnations, Sa Shoujian was a butcher who changed his ways and was therefore granted another human lifetime. In this narrative, it is King Yama, presiding over the courts of the netherworld, who recognizes Sa's potential and sends him back to the human world twice to pursue a path of cultivation and virtuous conduct. Unapologetically didactic, the first chapter heralds asceticism and righteousness as critical conditions for spiritual realization. The episodic nature of *The Enchanted Date*, as it follows Sa Shoujian's miraculous and exorcistic adventures, parallels the structure and narratorial style of *The Iron Tree* and *The Flying Sword* and, similarly to Xu and Lü, Sa ascends to take up his celestial appointment in the concluding chapter.

Notwithstanding the importance of the divine framing of these origin stories, it is the historical and geographical settings of the earthly lives of Xu Xun, Sa Shoujian, and Lü Dongbin that take center stage in the *Saints Trilogy*. The *Saints Trilogy* is remarkable in its attempts to trace the local traditions of the three immortals at the same time as celebrating them as transregional icons. Their sacred geographies, namely cult centers and famous sites associated with their lore, occupy an important place in the underlying hagiographical vision of the *Saints Trilogy*. Although Deng drew on a wide range of pre-existing sources in depicting the loci associated with Xu, Sa, and Lü, his interpretation of the significance of these places to their cultic lore and the visual emphasis of his cinematic narration breathed new life into the immortals' geographical "traces" (*yiji* 遺跡).

*The Iron Tree*, for instance, celebrates the rich heritage of Xu Xun in the Poyang Lake region, particularly in Xishan, Jiangxi, where his cult center is located, yet it also highlights sites in other regions, particularly in Fujian. The emphasis on sites associated with Xu Xun in Fujian could reflect an attempt to appeal to local audiences in northern Fujian, where the book was published, as well as to tap into the growing popularity of Xu Xun worship in the Lüshan sect that proliferated in the region during the Ming.<sup>13</sup> None of the previous Xu Xun hagiographies that Deng might have consulted could match the level of detail of *The Iron Tree* as it draws a map of the Xu Xun lore in narrative form. In a similar vein, *The Enchanted Date* follows Sa Shoujian's journeys in the world of the living and the underworld, before returning to his hometown of Xihe, where he attains immortality and achieves canonization. *The Flying Sword* reads almost like a travel guide featuring numerous famous loci associated with Lü Dongbin, such as the Yellow Crane Tower (*Huanghe lou* 黃鶴樓)<sup>14</sup> and Yueyang Tower (*Yueyang lou* 岳陽樓), where Lü reportedly leaves behind his "traces" in verse, most often in the form of poems inscribed on walls (*tibishi* 題壁詩). In their portrayals of iconic sites, the narratives of the *Saints Trilogy* echo "armchair travel"

literature (*woyou* 卧游) of the Ming that celebrated China's landscape as moulded by historical memory and cultural production (Fei 2010; Wang 2003).<sup>15</sup>

The *Saints Trilogy* is particularly noteworthy for weaving the doctrinal and ritual elements of the immortals' lore into their life stories by integrating canonical, liturgical, and epigraphic texts. These intertextual practices are significant in their dual function as providing access to materials that have hitherto been inaccessible to the vast majority of lay readers, and reinterpreting the relationship between these teachings and the immortals' hagiographic traditions. The unprecedented scale of Deng Zhimo's compilation work—a process of selection, interpretation, and reworking a vast corpus of pre-existing materials into *xiaoshuo* narratives—offered a renewed vision of the immortals and the teachings that came to be associated with their lore. The following section takes a closer look at a few examples to illustrate the significance of the textual hybridity of the *Saints Trilogy*.

### 3. Composite Texts: The Saints Trilogy as Multi-Layered Hagiographies

Deng's "building blocks", so to speak, were drawn from Daoist canonical and apocryphal texts, Buddhist sutras, *biji* anecdotes, liturgies, and literary works, among many other sources. In the *Trilogy's* ambitious attempt to standardize the multifaceted myth-cycles of Xu Xun, Lü Dongbin, and Sa Shoujian, Deng had to negotiate the different, and sometimes contradictory, aspects of the immortals' reverence, and their relationships with the ritual practices that came to be associated with their persona. One of the major challenges in this endeavour was molding diverse materials into long "vernacular" prose narrative-texts (*xiaoshuo*). Furthermore, beyond the challenges of consolidating texts of different genres into one uniform mode of narration, Deng had to contend with the episodic nature of his source-material in order to create a single, continuous plot. Although echoes of this episodic division loom large in the *Trilogy*, it breaks new ground in the context of the immortals' hagiographic traditions by creating a unified thread of causally connected moments. The tie that binds this sequence of events into a cohesive narrative is an underlying notion of predestination (*yuan* 緣), rooted in moral causality and steered by a divine concern for the wellbeing of humanity.

The travels of Lü Dongbin in *The Flying Sword* provide a convenient canvas to display numerous legends and personas that came to be associated with his icon, from the immortal bard traveling in disguise to the intoxicated miracle-worker. Lü Dongbin's quest to deliver the people he meets offers a causal framework to these otherwise unrelated episodes, as well as the rationale for his travels. In terms of its multitextuality, *The Flying Sword* presents a rich tapestry of poems, folktales, local lore, and instructions for inner alchemy. Lü Dongbin's famous conversion tale, known as the "Yellow Millet Dream" (*huangliang meng* 黃糧夢), is incorporated into Chapter 2 of *The Flying Sword*, following Lü's encounter with his master Zhongli Quan in a tavern.<sup>16</sup> Although Lü is eager to devote himself to spiritual cultivation, Zhongli Quan is concerned about Lü's worldly attachments, and poses seven tests, which Lü passes successfully. The following chapters depict Zhongli instructing Lü Dongbin in methods of external and internal alchemy (*waidan* 外丹 and *neidan* 內丹, respectfully). *The Flying Sword* draws on canonical and apocryphal sources, particularly Zhang Boduan's 張伯端 *Wuzhenpian* 悟真篇 and texts from the Zhong-Lü school, which exerted immense influence on Quanzhen Daoism. The conversations between Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin in Chapter 3, for instance, draw heavily on the *Zhong-Lü chuan dao ji* 鐘呂傳道集 (DZ 263).<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the narrative of *The Flying Sword* is dotted with poems attributed to Lü Dongbin (supposedly revealed through spirit writing) that have been previously included in anthologies such as *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 and *Lüzu zhi* 呂祖志.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the central concern of self-cultivation through inner alchemy, the poems attributed

to Lü Dongbin, in *The Flying Sword* as elsewhere, also celebrate the carefree life of the roaming immortal bard and invoke the trope of “recognizing the immortal”. Lü’s travels provide numerous opportunities to ruminate about the elusive presence of the immortal in our midst. *The Flying Sword* recounts Lü Dongbin’s recurring frustration as none whom he meets recognizes him. Upon visiting the Yueyang Tower (Yueyang lou 岳陽樓) in Chapter 10, Lü composes the following poem:

In the morning I travel to Beihai, in the evening to Cangwu,  
Courageous and irascible, a green snake in my sleeve.<sup>19</sup>  
Thrice I was intoxicated in Yueyang [but] no one recognized me,  
Thus I fly across Dongting Lake.

This poem, one of the oldest and most famous verses attributed to Lü Dongbin, appeared with slight variations in numerous sources since the Northern Song Dynasty, including the *Mengzhai bitan* 蒙齋筆談 and the *Yang wengong tanyuan* 楊文公談苑, according to which this poem was inscribed on the Yueyang Tower itself. During the Ming, this poem also appeared in several poetry anthologies, gazetteers, the Daoist canon, and other *xiaoshuo* narrative-texts.<sup>20</sup> The Yueyang Tower features prominently in Lü’s hagiographical tradition; the earliest extant full-length hagiography of Lü Dongbin, included in the *Yueyang fengtu ji* 岳陽風土記 (1104) by Fan Zhiming 范致明, not only describes his ancestral origins, his career, and his trademark swords, but also offers a detailed description of a portrait of Lü which—according to this account—was commissioned by the Prefect of Yueyang (supposedly during a visit by Lü Dongbin) and which hanged in the Yueyang Tower for public viewing (Ang 1997, p. 482; Baldrian-Husein 1986, pp. 141–43, 155, 160; Fan 1104, p. 3; Katz 1999, p. 60). In addition, the earliest extant “autobiography” of Lü, recorded in the *Nenggai zhai manlu* 能改齋漫錄 by Wu Zeng 吳曾 (fl. 1127–1160), was inscribed on stone in Yueyang.

Notwithstanding Deng’s reliance on pre-existing sources in composing *The Flying Sword*, the cinematic dramatization of Lü Dongbin’s practicing in reclusion provides a descriptive resonance to Lü’s cultivation efforts. In other words, Deng’s descriptive language parallels the inner alchemical methods that have been associated with Lü’s iconic figure. Engaged in meditation in a picturesque mountainside, as the coils of incense smoke engulf him, the natural landscape and the passage of time mirror Lü’s meditation. The scene reaches its zenith with an abridged version of one of the most renown and frequently quoted inner alchemical poems attributed to Lü Dongbin, *Yüfu ci* 漁父詞.<sup>21</sup> Remarkably, inner alchemy is not only described directly as a method for attaining immortality and alluded to in the description of the setting, but it is also corporealized in the narrative of *The Flying Sword*. The balancing of yin and yang, often referred to in inner alchemical discourse as the harnessing of the dragon and tiger, is embodied in Chapter 4 of *The Flying Sword* through Lü Dongbin’s subjugation of an actual dragon and tiger with a pair of precious swords entrusted to him by a mysterious monk.<sup>22</sup>

Alas, Lü Dongbin loses one of these magical swords (significantly, the male sword) already in the following chapter, Chapter 5, which combines two popular story-cycles in the Lü Dongbin lore: his erotic relationship with Bai Mudan and his dispute with a Chan monk known as Yellow Dragon (Eskildsen 2008, pp. 33–35; Wu 2007, pp. 585–604; Zhang 2006, pp. 193–229). The first half of the chapter describes Lü Dongbin’s seduction of Bai Mudan, an elite young woman. In this iteration of the story, Lü Dongbin uses sexual intercourse to extract the yin force from Bai Mudan in order to use it for attainment of immortality, a method known in Daoism as “cooperative cultivation” (*shuangxiu* 雙修), which gradually drains Bai Mudan of vitality. A Chan monk, Yellow Dragon, realizes the reason for her physical decline and confronts Lü Dongbin. In pre-existing sources, the dispute between Lü and the monk received different interpretations by Buddhists (wherein Lü Dongbin is converted to Buddhism) and Daoists

(wherein Lü wins the argument against the Yellow Dragon). *The Flying Sword* shows the Chan monk gaining the upper hand and confiscating one of Lü Dongbin's previous swords. Yet, the narrative frames this scene not as a victory for Buddhism, but rather as another step in Lü Dongbin's path toward (Daoist) attainment, wherein the Buddhist monk joins a line of teachers and divinities that guide Lü toward his predestined re-ascension, in keeping with the notion of Three Teachings that permeates the *Saints Trilogy*.

Even as the three protagonists of the *Trilogy* are presented as Daoist adepts, and the books repeatedly argue for the supremacy of Daoism, Deng Zhimo often draws on other traditions, particularly Buddhism. For instance, in *The Enchanted Date*, Sa Shoujian's spiritual path is frequently viewed through Buddhist lenses. In Chapter 3, as Sa decides to withdraw from society to devote himself to ascetic cultivation, he chants the apocryphal "Leather Bag Song" (*Tan pinang di yu* 歎皮囊諦語) and the *Heart Sutra*, both quoted in full.<sup>23</sup> The incorporation of the *Heart Sutra* here brings to mind Chapter 19 of *Journey to the West* (Bantly 1989; Hui 2015). Whether or not Deng Zhimo attempted to tap the success of this masterpiece, unlike the allegorical significance of the *Heart Sutra* in *Journey to the West*, the sutra seems to be used in *The Enchanted Date* simply to stress Sa's complete withdrawal from human society. The narrative expounds on Sa Shoujian's devotion to the path (*jingxin xiuxing* 精心修行) but it does not delve into a philosophical discussion on emptiness. Instead, the narrative swiftly turns to focus on Sa's encounter with the three Daoist masters from whom he receives the tools he uses throughout the narrative to help others: a fan to cure illnesses, a date to resolve hunger, and Thunder Rites (*leifa* 雷法) to vanquish demons. The cinematic depictions of Sa Shoujian's successful uses of Thunder Rites to exorcize malevolent demons, particularly in Chapters 4, 7, and 10, not only allude to the ritual context that informed the narrative but are also noteworthy here for their potentially instructional functions. Sa's final steps toward attainment are likewise colored by a combination of Daoist and Buddhist motifs. In Chapter 14, after Sa Shoujian completes a revelatory tour of the netherworld, he returns to the human realm to perform a rite to feed hungry souls. Although the ten-day sacrificial ceremony Sa organizes is conducted by Daoist priests, it echoes Yulanpen 盂蘭盆 ritual practices (Teiser 1986, pp. 47–67) and features the bodhisattva Guanyin, who appears disguised as a demon king in order to draw General Ma's *samādhi* fire away from the offerings for the deceased so that the souls of the dead would be able to feast on them (Durand-Dastès 2016, pp. 53–56). The late-Ming discourse on the Three Teachings, permeating contemporaneous narrative texts, looms large in this melange of Daoist and Buddhist elements and its underlying reification of the kinship system.

Among the three books of the *Trilogy*, *The Iron Tree* relies most heavily on Daoist doctrinal texts. Deng seems to draw particularly heavily on the abovementioned Xu Xun hagiography by Bai Yuchan that describes his reverence from both doctrinal and popular perspectives.<sup>24</sup> In his influential hagiography of Xu Xun, Bai Yuchan not only surveys the history of the Xu Xun cult but also describes its rituals and processions. Furthermore, in essays recounting his personal experiences in Xishan, Bai describes popular reverence and temple murals that presented visitors with pictorial hagiographies of Xu Xun. An expert in the pursuit of Daoist immortality, particularly through inner alchemy, and an enthusiastic follower of the Xu Xun cult who made a pilgrimage to his cult center in Jiangxi, Bai Yuchan offers invaluable accounts of Xu Xun reverence during his time.<sup>25</sup>

Another crucial source for the composition of *The Iron Tree* is the canonical *Xishan Xu zhenjun bashiwu hua lu* ("The Eighty-Five Transformations of the Perfected Xu of Xishan"; hereafter *Eighty-Five Transformations*), which parses the life of Xu Xun into eighty-five brief episodes (*hua* 化), each accompanied by a heptasyllabic poem.<sup>26</sup> *The Iron Tree* draws heavily on the content of this text and sometimes quotes it verbatim, but it radically transforms its mode of presentation. A clear example of this multi-

textuality is the episodes introducing Xu Xun's spiritual progenitors, Langong and Chenmu, in Chapters 2 and 3. Langong and Chenmu were featured in the Xu Xun cycle since the Tang Dynasty at the latest and appear to have been also revered independently (Liu 1985).<sup>27</sup> In *The Iron Tree*, the biographies of Langong and Chenmu are incorporated into Xu Xun's "prehistory", setting the stage for his appearance in Chapter 4. Langong and Chenmu are portrayed as virtuous adepts who are tasked with transmitting to Xu Xun the sacred teachings that will eventually enable him to subjugate the Dragon of Poyang Lake, a mission he is destined to accomplish later in the narrative, and which earns him divine canonization. Establishing this line of transmission is a key component in most Xu Xun hagiographies, including *The Iron Tree*. The biographical information of Langong and Chenmu and their roles in the chain of transmission in Chapters 2 and 3 is identical to that of the *Eighty-Five Transformations*, but in *The Iron Tree* they are described in vivid detail and some aspects of their lore receive more treatment than others.

However, Deng's contribution here is not limited to stylization stemming from the shift in the mode of writing, but it is also a great feat of intertextuality that aims to consolidate disparate aspects of the Xu Xun cult. In *The Iron Tree*, Deng makes some important modifications to the episode from *Eighty-Five Transformations* that tie it closely to other texts in the Xu Xun lore. For instance, the teaching that the divine envoy Xiaotiwang 孝悌王 transmits to Langong is mentioned laconically in the *Eighty-Five Transformations* as the "precious scripture of golden cinnabar, copper talisman, and iron scrolls" (*Jindan baojing tongfu tiejuan* 金丹寶經銅符鐵券), without divulging anything about its contents or origins. Although previous hagiographies of Xu Xun have already mentioned this scripture by name, *The Iron Tree* is the first to directly link this mysterious teaching to the content of a doctrinal text bearing the title *Tongfu tiejuan* (included in the *Daozang tiyao* 道藏輯要 and the *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書). Roughly four quarters of the teaching which is recorded in Chapters 2 and 3 of *The Iron Tree* as the *Tongfu tiejuan* is nearly identical to the doctrinal text bearing this title.

*The Iron Tree* makes a few additional modifications to the episode. Here, Langong also receives from Xiaotiwang "formulas of the immortals" (*xianjia miaojue* 仙家妙訣), "upper clarity spirit manuscript" (*shangqing lingcao* 上清靈草), and the method of "flying steps for vanquishing demons" (*feibu zhanxie zhi fa* 飛步斬邪之法). While the first two are rather generic terms, the latter relates to a specific method that has become closely associated with Xu Xun and Jingming Daoism, recorded in the anonymous Song dynasty *Jingming dongshen shangpin jing* 淨明洞神上品經 (DZ 1103). Additionally, Deng drops the prophetic heptasyllabic regulated poem that concludes the episode in the *Eighty-Five Transformations*, which focused on Langong's role as transmitter of divine teachings, and instead adds an original heptasyllabic *ci* poem, intoned by Xiaotiwang as he floats away on auspicious clouds, extolling self-cultivation through inner alchemy. *The Iron Tree* goes on to describe Langong studying the scriptures and successfully using the exorcistic methods he had received to subjugate a dangerous dragon, thus demonstrating the efficacy of the teachings. This scene foreshadows Xu Xun's most iconic feat of exorcism at the end of the book—the subjugation of the Dragon of Poyang Lake in the penultimate chapter of *The Iron Tree*.

This iconic scene, a cornerstone of Xu Xun reverence, harks back to his role as a water deity in the early stages of his myth-making. In terms of its textual composition, it is a particularly layered episode. Xu Xun's pursuit of the dragon serves as an effective narrative device, occupying six chapters, or nearly half of *The Iron Tree*. After a series of adventurous, shapeshifting chases, Xu Xun and his acolytes manage to overpower the dragon and tie it to an iron pillar, which they position in a well in Xu's hometown of Yuzhang, along with an exorcistic incantation (*zhu* 祝), which is also recorded verbatim in several other Xu Xun hagiographies:<sup>28</sup>

If the iron tree blooms, and this demon will revive, I shall return.

If the iron tree follows the right path, this demon will be subdued forever.  
Water demons are now expelled from this site, towns and villages need not worry.

The scene goes on to quote a poem by Wu Quanjie 吳全節 of the Yuan and a record (*ji* 記) which reads:

The iron tree controls the streams, in ten thousand years it will never rest.  
(If) the world is in chaos, this place will have nothing to worry about.  
(If) a drought pervades the land, this place will receive ample (rain).

The chapter furthermore describes Xu Xun leaving behind a host of other charms and demon-suppressing talismans: he casts an iron talisman (*fu* 符) into Poyang Lake, places an iron cap on Luling yuan Pond 廬陵元潭, and erects a “pacifying office” on the top of Mount Tiaoyao 峽嶠山, all of which echo local legends about Xu and his “traces” in Jiangxi. Due to the importance of this episode in the Xu Xun lore, it is not surprising that it takes center stage in Deng Zhimo’s *The Iron Tree*, where it serves as a rite of passage. Xu Xun’s subjugation of the dragon proves his efficacy as an exorcist on the one hand, and allegorically alludes to his mastering of inner alchemical self-cultivation on the other hand, thus demonstrating his worthiness of divine canonization (in the following chapter), in keeping with the *Trilogy*’s hagiographic vision of the immortal-saint. Deng’s intertextual practices in *The Iron Tree* not only provided unprecedented access to specialized materials that have hitherto been the purview of a limited circle of readers, but also resituated them within the history of Xu Xun and his cultic lineage, and offered his own interpretation of these teachings for a general, non-specialist readership.

Lastly, it is important to reiterate that while most of the materials that Deng incorporated into the *Saints Trilogy* were reworked into *xiaoshuo* prose, the *Trilogy* is also dotted with excerpts quoted verbatim, such as admonitions (*xun* 訓), charms and talismans (*fu* 符, *zhen* 鎮), spells (*zhou* 咒), curses (*zhu* 祝), poems by famous men-of-letters, Buddhist sutras, and instructions for inner alchemy. One notable example of this textual conglomeration is the final chapter of *The Iron Tree* depicting Xu Xun’s ascendance, which includes divine memorials (*zou* 奏), proclamations (*xuanzha* 宣詔), and the “Longsha Prophecy” (*longsha chen* 龍沙讖), predicting Xu Xun’s re-emergence in the seventeenth century. This textual tapestry would not have been possible without the access to a wide range of texts that Deng Zhimo possessed in his role as an editor and a de facto “house writer” of the Cuiqing tang publishing house (Bai 2005; Chia 2002; Lowry 2003, 2005). In this sense, the multitextuality of the *Trilogy* should also be understood in light of late Ming book culture that ushered a new era of experimentation with the *xiaoshuo* writing mode.

#### 4. The *Trilogy* in the World of Late Ming Publishing

In the course of his career, Deng produced over thirty works for mass publication, the vast majority of which consisted of anthologies and guidebooks at a time when such compilations were in great demand and extremely profitable (Miao 2000, pp. 223–24; Ko 1994, pp. 34–44). Among the works Deng produced are literary anthologies, encyclopedic guides, collections of letters, and narrative texts. Chia notes that Deng’s compilations demonstrate “his marketable skill as a quick producer of entertaining middle-brow pieces that sold well in the book markets, especially if they were packaged with some care” (Chia 2002, pp. 160–61). Despite Deng’s attentiveness to the demands of the book market, like many of his peers, he considered his work as producer of knowledge as a moral obligation to society. As a “journeyman-editor”, as Lowry refers to him, he was keenly aware of the possibilities associated with his position as a propagator of information on a large scale (Lowry 2005, pp. 40–41). The didactic tone that permeates the *Saints Trilogy* is in keeping with that of Deng’s other projects, as well as that of contemporaneous works.

Deng's position as writer-editor expanded his personal and professional social network across Jiangxi, Fujian, and the Jiangnan region, and provided him with access to a swath of materials. The anthologies he compiled, or collaborated on with colleagues at the Cuiqing tang, demonstrate Deng's extensive learning and the range of texts within his reach. Among the *leishu* that Deng produced, particularly noteworthy here is *Pangxun siliu gushi yuan* 旁訓四六古事苑, on which he collaborated with Yu Yingqiu 餘應虬 (Chia 2002, pp. 235–36). This compilation, which was published in 1617 by the Side tang 四德堂 publishing house, covers an extensive array of subjects, from astronomy and geography to fashion and plants, mirroring the scope of contemporaneous encyclopedias (Shang 2003, 2005). Volume 8 of this work includes hagiographic sketches of buddhas and immortals (*xianfo* 仙佛), deities (*shenxian* 神仙), Buddhists (*fanshi* 梵釋), and spirits (*guishen* 鬼神) that allude to and quote from the classics, Buddhist sutras, and anthologies such as *Shenxian zhuan*, *Liexian zhuan*, and *Soushen ji*.

The *Saints Trilogy* reflects Deng's skills as compiler-cum-writer while betraying his personal engagement with the source material. Deng stresses the veracity of the *Trilogy* by describing the three books as the fruit of meticulous research. In his closing remark at the end of *The Iron Tree*, Deng writes that because he was interested in the way (Dao) of Xu Xun, he "researched the [immortal's] traces, sought and gathered the remnants [of his life], and fused them together to create this book". As he states, the three books should not be regarded merely as historical or hagiographical records of the protagonists' traditions, but rather, as forming living bridges between the readers and the immortals, whose enduring presence in this world is stressed throughout the *Trilogy*. In his preface to *The Flying Sword*, Deng writes:

"How to see Patriarch Lü? It is by collating the traces of his life (*yishi* 遺事) and his poetry, wherein the patriarch's own voice is preserved. I believe Patriarch Lü is present in his poetry. In the past, Sima Ziwei 司馬子微 [Sima Chengzheng, 647–735] studied the *Master Concealed in Heaven* [*Tianyin zi* 天隱子, DZ 1026] for three years, and received the teachings by which to test those who seek the Dao. Every chapter can be verified. How would it be possible that Patriarch Lü won't reveal himself to those who seek the Dao like Master Sima? To those who admire Lü, he will appear in a dream. If one admires Lü through the real traces of his life and by reciting his poetry, this would be like encountering Patriarch Lü himself. Therefore, it is impossible not to read this compilation (*ji* 集). I named this compilation *The Flying Sword*".

Deng's prefaces also tie the enduring presence of the immortals in our world with the relevance and usefulness of his books. In his preface to *The Iron Tree*, he argues that:

"Although the Jin [i.e., the era of Xu Xun] is far removed from our current generation in the Ming, the immortal [Xu Xun] repeatedly emerges to protect the country, thus in this era the iron tree is still glorious and illuminous. This narrative (*ji* 記) that I composed is not superficial [i.e., not false]!"

If Deng Zhimo's prefaces and concluding remarks are to be taken at face value, as I believe they should be, they suggest that he conceived of the *Saints Trilogy* as informative vehicles for broadcasting his own understanding of the immortals' figures and cults. One might logically argue that Deng's truth claims could be dismissed as either advertisements or authorial practices in late Ming literature that toy with notions of truth and fictionality. However, in presenting the *Saints Trilogy* as contributing to, and consciously engaging with, the hagiographical traditions of Xu Xun, Lü Dongbin, and Sa Shoujian, Deng Zhimo's prefaces strongly echo those of canonical hagiographies. A strikingly similar tone can be found, for instance, in the preface of the Yuan-era Quanzhen master Miao Shanshi 苗善時 to his hagiographical composition devoted to Lü Dongbin, titled *Chunyang dijun shenhua miaotong ji* 純陽帝君神化妙通紀 (DZ 305).

In this respect, I argue that we should read Deng's truth claims in light of the conventions of hagiographical writing that informed his work on the *Trilogy*. The *Trilogy* should also be understood in light of the historiographical and biographical tendencies of seventeenth-century *xiaoshuo* writing practices that render them almost akin to anthologies (Hegel 1977, p. 130). Considering that the late Ming "vernacular" *xiaoshuo* mode is firmly rooted in historical discourse (Berg 2003, pp. 176–78), Deng's choice of this form of writing is not out of the ordinary, and in many ways represents the norm rather than the exception.

An interesting case for comparison, that speaks volumes of the effects of the *Trilogy's* multitextuality, is Feng Menglong's adaptations of Deng Zhimo's narratives as short stories (*huaben* 話本), which he published several times under slightly different titles.<sup>29</sup> Although Feng Menglong effectively borrowed Deng's *Trilogy*, keeping most of its original content and structure, Feng made several crucial changes that signal a shift to a different mode of reading. Unsurprisingly, Feng dropped Deng Zhimo's prefaces and his concluding address to the readers. In order to bring the narratives in line with the rest of the stories in his anthologies, known collectively as *Sanyan* 三言, he eliminated chapter breaks, erased most of the poems and descriptive passages, and, most crucially, he removed nearly all the doctrinal and liturgical materials from the narratives. These alterations to the *Trilogy* carry significant implications for the narratives' potential functions. Feng Menglong reduced the hybridity of the *Trilogy* and shifted the focus away from questions concerning self-cultivation and divine canonization, highlighting instead the action-packed sequences that make up the immortals' life stories. The encyclopedic comprehensiveness that Deng Zhimo seems to have aspired to reach in the *Trilogy* does not seem to have been a major concern for Feng Menglong. While Deng Zhimo openly engaged with the immortals' lore and worship, and positioned himself as contributing to them, by reducing the multitextuality of the narratives and therefore doing away with much of their "religious" content, Feng's renditions drew the narratives away from the realms of hagiography and cultic reverence.<sup>30</sup>

Yet it is important to note that the *Trilogy*, which positions itself squarely within the realms of hagiography and reverence, took part in a broader wave of commercially published narratives celebrating the lives of gods and immortals that were in vogue around the turn of the seventeenth century, particularly in south-east China. Notable examples of works in this group include *Han Xiangzi Quanzhuan* 韓湘子全傳 by the writer-publisher Yang Erzeng 楊爾曾, as well as several narratives published (and likely co-authored) by the prolific publisher Yu Xiangdou 余象斗, among other examples from the period (Bai 2005; Ganany 2018; Shahar 1998; Yang 2007). These books share a similar format and narration style, a preoccupation with spiritual realization, and a trove of common motifs. Much like Deng Zhimo's *Saints Trilogy*, Wanli-era hagiographic narratives are focused on the life and cult of a single figure. Although these books vary significantly in quality of writing and were clearly put together with profit in mind, they represent a shared attempt to standardize and propagate the reverence of popular cultural icons. Furthermore, contemporaneous hagiographic narrative texts display a range of intertextual practices, some showing resemblance to Deng's *Trilogy*. The *Han Xiangzi Quanzhuan*, which Clart describes as "a didactic novel that teaches the superiority of Daoism over Confucianism and provides quite practical lessons in Daoist cultivation" (Yang 2007, pp. xxii–xxiv), is likewise a multi-layered narrative that functions simultaneously as a hagiography and an introduction to inner alchemy. Its composition is evidently informed by Yang Erzeng's other editorial and anthologizing projects, which also included two other Daoist works (the hagiographical anthology *Xianyuan jishi* 仙媛紀事 and the doctrinal *Xu zhenjun jingming zongjiao lu* 許真君淨明宗教錄). Contemporaneous hagiographic narratives, such as the abovementioned *Tale of the Eight Immortals* produced by Yu Xiangdou, not only offered entertaining retellings of the protagonists' lives, but also supplemented them

with appendices that included canonical texts, news about local temples, dedications to donors, messages from the immortals (revealed through spirit writing), and detailed instructions for ritual practices (Ganany 2018, pp. 57–64).

## 5. Coda

In its textual hybridity, Deng's *Saints Trilogy* shines a valuable light on the interplay between print culture and popular reverence in late Ming. Similarly to contemporaneous experimentations with multitextuality in *xiaoshuo* writing, from *Jinpingmei* to *Xiyoubu*, which Li Qiancheng rightfully describes as "a literary collage" (Li and Hegel 2020, p. xxiv), the *Saints Trilogy* incorporates its source material into the narrative with care. This type of narrative hybridity effectively collapses the categories of knowledge that governed the presentation of information in encyclopedias and anthologies in order to produce a single, coherent, and highly entertaining narrative. As a "literature of canonization" (Meulenbeld 2015) that is firmly rooted in cultic reverence, the *Trilogy* highlights the crucial role of writers-compilers such as Deng Zhimo in reinterpreting and disseminating specialized knowledge—in this case, doctrinal and hagiographical information—to an unprecedentedly large and diverse lay readership. In this respect, the *Saints Trilogy* should be regarded as attempting to form a kind of "alternative lay canon" (Durand-Dastès 2013, p. 78). In this respect, the *Saints Trilogy* undoes Shahar's point that "in terms of its textual tradition, Chinese religion is inseparable from vernacular fiction and drama" (Shahar 1998, p. 18). As Deng Zhimo himself reiterates, the primary goal of composing the *Saints Trilogy* was to present comprehensive records of the immortals that serve as guidebooks for their worship and roadmaps for self-cultivation.

The textual layering of the *Trilogy* is closely tied to the vision of the immortal saint that Deng and contemporaneous writers advocated in hagiographic narratives—a miracle-working Daoist adept, whose attainment and canonization is conditioned upon his self-cultivation through inner alchemy and the protective services he provides mankind, from exorcism to curing epidemics. The issue of conversion, or deliverance, underlies the *Trilogy's* dual emphasis on self-cultivation and altruistic action. The quest to convert others not only provides a compelling narrative device, but it also resonates with the overarching aim of the *Trilogy* to inspire the readers to follow in the footsteps of the immortals. As demonstrated above, moments of heightened multitextuality in the *Trilogy* correspond to its hagiographical and doctrinal functions. Episodes of religious instruction, depictions of cultivation practices, and protective action (exorcistic or otherwise) are particularly layered, showcasing Deng's conscious attempt to exhaust the sources at his disposal. The format of *xiaoshuo* narration provided Deng with an ever-expanding canvas to incorporate different types of doctrinal and liturgical materials that make up the multifaceted lore of the three immortals. Within the basic framework of the "banished immortal" trope, the episodic nature of the protagonists' hagiographic traditions looms large despite the narratives' structural unity, while maintaining the tension between the disparate—and sometimes contradictory—aspects of the protagonists' myth-cycles.

Crucially, in striving to form living bridges between the readers and the immortals, either by facilitating reverence or providing models for cultivation, the *Saints Trilogy* draws our attention to the vast realm of cultural preoccupations with the immortals that has been intertwined with their cultic worship for generations, but has often been overlooked. The productive interplay between the various forms of engagement with the immortals—as subjects of worship, as models of spiritual attainment, as vehicles for doctrinal teachings, as literary and dramatic protagonists, as popular artistic tropes, and as cultural icons in a broad sense—has been a key factor in the expansion and endurance of their veneration. The *Trilogy* is best understood as a prominent example of this interrelated network of cultural expressions that has

been shaping the lore and reverence of Xu Xun, Lü Dongbin, and Sa Shoujian in the last millennium.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I use the term “publishing” when referring to the producers of the works (authors, editors, printers, etc.) and the terms “print culture” and “book culture” to refer more broadly to all those partaking in the production, circulation, and consumption of books (i.e., producers, merchants, and audiences).
- <sup>2</sup> The local roots of Xu Xun’s reverence continued to shape his lore during the Ming, centuries after the rise of his cultic worship. For instance, the local gazetteer *Jiangxi tongzhi* 江西通志 includes over a dozen entries from the Ming alone that describe the local origins of the Xu cult.
- <sup>3</sup> Some Lüshan temples in Fujian identify Xu Xun with Jiulang fazhu 九郎法主, though in Jianyang this title is often used to designate two figures: Xu Xun and Xu Jia 徐甲. See (Ye and Lagerwey 2007, pp. 10–11, 362–64).
- <sup>4</sup> The anonymous, supposedly thirteenth-century *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan* is composed of a series of fifty-three units of text and image. Its narrative follows Bai Yuchan’s hagiography very closely. This pictorial hagiography opens with two (unillustrated) prefaces: the first is titled Yulong xizhao 玉陸錫詔 (“the imperial order granted on the jade steps”) which includes an edict from the Jade Emperor delivered to Xu Xun by two immortals, and the second entitled Zhenjun shenggao 真君聖誥 (“granting the divine title Perfected Saint”), which lists Xu Xun’s titles and praises his filiality and humaneness. Akizuki Kanei dates this text around 1295, but Xu Wei argues that it is difficult to ascertain the dating of texts that were later included in the Daoist canon in 1445; see Xu (2011, p. 119).
- <sup>5</sup> According to Schipper, the cult of Xu Xun was among the most prominent Daoist traditions of the Song and Yuan Dynasties; see Schipper (1985, p. 813). It is noteworthy that alongside Xu Xun’s portrayals in hagiographic, doctrinal, and liturgical sources, local gazetteers since the Song dynasty propagated Xu reverence and legitimized his temples, bridging Daoist ritual and popular worship of Xu Xun; see Chen and Wang (2014, pp. 56–64).
- <sup>6</sup> Schipper argues that the Jingming Dao did not offer any new rituals or liturgies, but was rather a local school within the framework of the Lingbao tradition, whose uniqueness lies precisely in its relationship with a local cult—the Xu Xun cult; see Schipper (1985, pp. 827–28).
- <sup>7</sup> The album is housed in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. See Boltz (2004, pp. 191–238) and Wang (2012, p. 69, note 46). On Xie Shichen, see Ju-yu (1997, pp. 1–26).
- <sup>8</sup> Certain sources describe Deng as a native of Raozhou 饒州, Anren county 安仁縣, Jiangxi, whereas other sources claim he hails from Yuzhang, near Nanchang, Jiangxi. The *Sikuquanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要 describes Deng as a man of Rao’an (饒安人), though Sun Kaidi, among others, argue that this is unlikely; see Bai (2005, pp. 75–77).
- <sup>9</sup> Among the pre-existing hagiographic sketches of Sa Shoujian that Deng seems to have drawn upon are found in Zhao Daoyi’s *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjia* and Wanli-era editions of *Soushenji*, such as *Xinke chuxiang zengbu soushen ji Daquan* 新刻出像增補搜神記大全 and *Sanjiao yuanliu shengdi fozu soushen daquan* 三教源流聖帝佛祖搜神大全. It is noteworthy that Sa is also celebrated in an anonymous drama that probably dates to early Ming titled *Sa zhenren yeduan bitaohua* 薩真人夜斷碧桃花, as well as in another drama from the period, now lost, titled *Sa zhenren bairi shengtian* 薩真人白日升天.
- <sup>10</sup> The group known as the Eight Immortals became a recurring theme in storytelling and cultic worship, as well as a staple motif in art, since the Tang Dynasty to the latest. Its members usually include Zhongli Quan 鍾離權, Tieguai Li 鐵拐李, Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, He Xiangtu 何仙姑, Lan Caihe 藍采和, Han Xiangzi 韓湘子, Cao Guojiu 曹國舅, and Zhang Guolao 張果老. On the Eight Immortals as a group, see (Clart 2009; Han 1992; Pu 1936; Wu 2006; Yetts 1916, 1922a, 1922b; Zhu 2014).
- <sup>11</sup> Interestingly, altruistic action is central to the immortals’ depiction in contemporaneous, non-“literary” sources as well. For instance, a stele inscription by Chen Wenzhu 陳文燭 (1536–1595), recorded in a Wanli-era Nanchang local gazetteer, argues that Xu Xun became a subject of local worship in recognition for his contribution to mankind, not his celestial status. See “Xu zhenjun miao bei” 許真君廟碑, in the 1588 *Xinxiu Nanchang fu zhi* 新修南昌府志, juan 28.
- <sup>12</sup> This line of narration invokes jātaka stories depicting the virtuous deeds of the Buddha in his previous incarnations (Kleine 1998, p. 328).

- 13 Local gazetteers describe the popularity of Xu Xun temples in the Jianyang area and attest to the profound influence of his reverence on the region; see for instance the *Jianjing fu zhi* 建寧府志, *juan* 48, p. 2797, and *juan* 50, p. 3042; *Guihua xianzhi* 歸化縣志, *juan* 10, p. 206; *Tingzhou fu zhi* 汀州府志, *juan* 3, p. 701, and others.
- 14 Regarding Lü Dongbin and the Yellow Crane Tower, see Zhu (2014, pp. 457–58, 481).
- 15 See for instance encyclopedic projects and geographical compendia in Wanli-era print culture such as *Hainei qiguai* 海內奇觀 by Yang Erzeng and *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會 by Wang Qi 王圻 and his son Wang Siyi 王思義, among others.
- 16 The “Yellow Millet Dream” is not only a mainstay in the Lü Dongbin myth-cycle, but also a recurring trope in Chinese literature and drama, often referred to as “yellow millet” or “life in a pillow” tales. In the Lü Dongbin lore, see for instance the *chuanqi* play *Lü zhenren huangliang mengjing ji* 呂真人黃梁夢境記.
- 17 Among other instances, Chapter 3 of *The Flying Sword* quotes numerous lines from the *Qiyán* 七言, attributed to Lü Dongbin, included in volume 856 of the *Quan Tang Shi*. Furthermore, in *The Iron Tree*, Deng modeled the conversations of Xu Xun and Wu Meng after conversations about inner alchemy between Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin in the *Zhong-Lü chuan dao ji*.
- 18 The *Record of Patriarch Lü* (*Lüzú zhi* 呂祖志) was compiled in the late sixteenth century shortly before the printing of the *Continuation of the Daoist Canon* (*Xu Daozang* 續道藏) in which it was included. It remains the largest corpus of texts related to Lü Dongbin in the Daoist canon (regarding poems taken from earlier collections, see Wu 2007, p. 585).
- 19 The “green snake” refers to a sword (or rather a dagger) which, according to legend, Lü Dongbin carries inside his sleeve. Song-era sources link this double-edged dagger to medical and exorcistic usages. One legend claims that this sword was originally a huge snake which Lü Dongbin encountered in Yueyang and managed to insert it into his sleeve, transforming it into a dagger (Baldrian-Hussein 1986, pp. 140–42).
- 20 See for instance *Sandong qunxian lu* 三洞群仙錄 (DZ 1248), *Yueyang fu tu ji* 岳陽府土記, *Yuan qu xuan* 元曲選, and *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, and the appendix of *Tale of the Eight Immortals* (*Baxian chuchu dongyou ji* 八仙出處東遊記 / *Shang dong baxian zhuan* 上洞八仙傳), among others.
- 21 The *Yüfu ci* also appears in the abovementioned *Lüzú zhi* and *Tale of the Eight Immortals*, among other sources.
- 22 The dragon and tiger as a metaphor for the duality of yin and yang in inner alchemy is used extensively in the Zhong-Lü school and in the in *Wuzhen pian* by Zhang Boduan.
- 23 The “Leather Bag Song” is also known popularly as the “Dharma Master’s Song of the Leather Bag”, *Damo dashi pinang ge* 達摩大師皮囊歌.
- 24 Bai Yuchan’s hagiography, which ties Xu Xun to Jingming or Filial Daoism and especially its politically oriented *zhongxiao* 忠孝 strain, was a particularly important source for Deng’s understanding of Xu Xun’s role as the patriarch in Jingming Daoism. Explicit references to Xu Xun’s filiality are scant before the Ming. The *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 (984) quotes the lost text *Xu Xun biezhuàn* 許遜別傳 which portrays Xu Xun’s devotion to his family after the death of his father, despite the cruel treatment he suffered from his mother and sister-in-law, whereas another entry from *Taiping Yulan*, quoting the *Youming lu* 幽明錄, narrates an encounter between Xu Xun and the ghost of his deceased father, who appealed to Xu Xun’s filial duty (*xiaoti* 孝悌) to ensure a proper burial. See *Taiping Yulan*, *juan* 424: 65, p. 2604 and *juan* 519: 9, p. 3139.
- 25 Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾, “Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan” 旌陽許真君傳 in Bai (2013, pp. 61–72) and Bai (1969, vol. 3, pp. 1013–40). Interestingly, the anthology of Bai Yuchan’s writings is titled *Yulong ji* 玉隆集 (preserved in the anonymously compiled *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書), alluding to Xu Xun’s cult center, the Yulong gong—the name that Emperor Song Zhenzong bestowed on Xu Xun’s shrine. Bai Yuchan dedicated three essays to his visits to Xishan and the Yulong gong: “Longsha xian hui ge ji: Yulong gong” 龍沙仙會閣記: 玉隆宮, “Yulong wanshou gong Yunhui tang ji” 玉隆萬壽宮雲會堂記, and “Yulong wanshou gong Dao yuan ji” 玉隆萬壽宮道院記. Regarding Bai Yuchan’s life and writing, see (Liu 2012; Skar 2008, pp. 203–6).
- 26 The full title of this text reads *The Record of the Eighty-Five Transformations of the Perfected Lord Xu of West Mountain* (Xishan Xu zhenjun bashiwu hua lu 西山許真君八十五化錄, preface dates 1246). It is attributed to Shi Cen 施岑, a prominent disciple of Xu Xun and a member of the group known as the Twelve Perfected (十二真君).
- 27 Hagiographies of Langong and Chenmu also circulated independently from the Xu Xun cycle as early as the Tang Dynasty; a hagiography of Chenmu is included in Du Guangting’s *Yongcheng jixian lu* 壩城集仙錄 and a hagiography of Langong is included in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, for instance.
- 28 See for instance its inclusion in Bai Yuchan’s *Jingyang Xu zhenjun zhuan* and the album *Zhenxian shiji*, among other sources. The use of iron for the construction of Xu Xun’s iron tree is rooted in popular practices relating to the subjugation of water-related threats by placing iron pillars or iron oxen near lakes and waterways, in accordance with the theory of the Five Phases. This scene of subjugation also brings to mind the legend of Yu suppressing the god of the Huai and Guo rivers, Wuzhiqi 無支祁, by chaining him to the base of Turtle Mountain 龜山 (see Andersen 2001), as well as the imprisonment of Sun Wukong under the Five Elements Mountain in *Journey to the West*.
- 29 For instance, Feng Menglong reworked *The Iron Tree* into two *huaben* versions that are almost identical: *Jingyang gong tieshu zhen yao* 旌陽宮鐵樹鎮妖 appeared in the anthology *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言; *Xu zhenjun Jingyang gong zhan jiao zhuan* 許真君旌陽宮斬蛟傳 appeared in *Sanjiao ounian* 三教偶拈. See Li (1997, pp. 126–27).
- 30 It is noteworthy here that Feng Menglong’s adaptations never eclipsed the *Saints Trilogy*, which circulated continuously since late Ming and influenced other works. In many ways, Feng’s renditions represent a different form of book consumption than that of

the *Saints Trilogy*. This shift in reading habits in the seventeenth century is an issue that deserves further study and lies beyond the scope of this article.

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DZ 305 *Chunyang dijun shenhua miaotong ji* 純陽帝君神化妙通紀 by Miao Shanshi 苗善時

DZ 440 *Xu taishi zhenjun tuzhuan* 許太史真君圖傳

DZ 448 *Xishan Xu zhenjun bashiwu hua lu* 西山許真君八十五化錄

DZ 449 *Xiaodao Wu Xu er zhenjun zhuan* 孝道吳許二真君傳

DZ 1026 *Tianyin zi* 天隱子

DZ 1103 *Jingming dongshen shangpin jing* 淨明洞神上品經

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