The Adulators and the Adulated: 
Religious Patronage of a Regional Ruler 
in Early Tenth-Century China

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This article explores the significant role played by religious groups in the legitimation of the Former Shu founded by Wang Jian in the chaotic early tenth century. Whereas the Daoist priest Du Guangting attempted to legitimate the regime on religious grounds, the Buddhist monk Guanxiu employed his literary talent to depict the military ruler as a savior in a tumultuous age. This article also suggests that the Wang Jian’s religious patronage was pragmatic; he used religion to justify his rule but never lessened tight control over religious groups.

When the memorial reached Wang Jian 王建 (847–918) on a late afternoon in the fall of 908, the founding emperor of the Former Shu (Qian Shu 前蜀, 907–25), weary yet excited, was returning by horse to his palace from the northern suburbs of the capital Chengdu 成都, where he had just reviewed his imperial armies. The memorial had been submitted by the imperial Daoist master Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933). It told of two large yellow clouds that had become an august purple as they hovered near the city walls — an event that coincided with the military parade. The yellow clouds, Du explained, had appeared during the reigns of Yao 尧 and Shun 尧舜, two sage and ancient kings, while purple clouds had allegedly appeared during the reigns of two other great monarchs. Thus Du Guangting predicted that Wang Jian would “surpass” (chao 超) these historic examples, adding, “your virtue has caused Heaven to summon auspicious clouds, an event observed by Chinese as well as barbarians, their merriment extending from the mountains to the seas” (Du 1986, 1.2–3).

Although the source does not mention the monarch’s response to this memorial, Wang Jian most likely appreciated it, not only for the political compliment, but also for Du’s creative interpretation of auspicious phenomena, which fortuitously coincided with his urgent need for legitimacy. Wang Jian emerged from the political chaos of the closing years of the Tang dynasty (618–907). He had once served in the imperial army and successfully rose to power and occupied a domain in the Shu (today’s Sichuan prov-
Religious Patronage in Tenth-Century China

ince), where he received the title military governor (jiedushi 節度使) and then king of Shu 蜀王. In 907, upon learning that one of his rivals in north China had murdered the last Tang monarch, he proclaimed himself emperor of the Great Shu empire (Ouyang 1974, 63.783–91; Xue 1976, 136.1815–9; Zhang 1964, 1.2b–13; Wang 1960, 219.17a–b; Wang 2008). A wise and far-sighted ruler, Wang Jian realized early that he could conquer Shu on horseback, but could not govern the land by martial means. In many senses, justifying his imperial rule amid the divisions of tenth-century China, known as the period of Five Dynasties and Ten States (Wudai Shiguo 五代十國, 907–79), was a greater challenge than his military conquest of the region. An illiterate man hailing from a humble family in north China, he obviously lacked broad support in the territory and had none of the reputation that might have attached to an aspirant from a prestigious elite clan. Thus, from the start of his reign in 907, legitimation of his imperial authority was his most pressing concern. Under these circumstances, Du Guangting’s memorial was not surprising, as it provided supernatural justification for the legitimacy demanded by the new court.

This article aims to explore the dynamic interactions between Wang Jian and the religious luminaries under his protection during the chaotic late Tang and early Five Dynasties periods. Wang Jian fully realized the importance of religion to the legitimation and consolidation of his new regime in the Shu, a region known for its deep-rooted religious traditions. Driven by this pragmatic motivation, Wang Jian, like most potentates of his day, looked to diverse religious traditions to bolster his sovereignty but never lessened supervision and control over religious groups. There was a mutually beneficial cooperative relationship between the ruler and his religious supporters. Wang Jian patronized the Buddhist monks and Daoist priests to establish his legitimacy during his transition from provincial governor to an imperial emperor, while the religious elite, represented by Daoist priest Du Guangting and Buddhist master Guanxiu 贯休 (832–912), deemed participation in the relatively safe Shu state the most practical way to survive the chaotic early tenth century, and both actively contributed to the Shu ruler’s legitimation.

Du Guangting & His Service at the Shu Court

An indigenous religious tradition of China, Daoism had gained great popularity in the Shu area since the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) (Duan 1999, 147–57). As early as the fourth century, a regional regime in Shu had adopted Daoism to consolidate its rule (Kleeman 1998, 61–85). The religion flourished during the Tang dynasty, as the Tang rulers declared Laozi 老子, the supreme Daoist deity, their ancestor, and extensively invoked Daoist liturgy to help legitimize their power (Barrett 1996; Benn 1987; Xiong
Its popularity in Shu continued during the late Tang due to the presence of Xizong’s僖宗 (873–88) court-in-exile at Chengdu (Verellen 1989a, 1989b, 1994). Given this history, Wang Jian’s support of Daoism was inevitable. It served as to legitimate his power and mediate between the local cults and the new leadership from outside of the region. Moreover, Wang Jian used Daoism to demonstrate continuity between the preceding royal house and himself as self-declared successor to the Tang. This can be inferred from Wang Jian’s enhancements of the Zhangren Temple丈人觀 at Mount Qingcheng青城山 (forty-five miles northwest of Chengdu), the sanctuary of a deity that Xizong enfeoffed in 881, two decades before Wang Jian’s accession (Huang 1986, 1.7a–8b).

Throughout his reign, Wang Jian showed great generosity toward Daoism and its representatives at the Shu court. His benefactions included the construction of Daoist temples, the conversion of royal mansions into temples, and the bestowal of escalating honorary titles for prestigious Daoist masters. For example, in 912, upon receiving report of an auspicious text found at Mount Xianju仙居山 (thirty miles north of Chengdu), Wang Jian ordered the construction of a new temple, which was “built of huge stones with multiple functions” (SGCQ 115.1704). The relationship was mutually beneficial: Doaist support legitimized the emperor and imperial support enriched the culture of religion. Such reciprocity was reflected in his cooperation with the Daoist master Du Guangting.

Du Guangting was the most celebrated Daoist figure during the late Tang and early Five Dynasties (Tao 1986, 1.11b–12b; Wu 1983, 47.674–6; Luo 2002a, 2002b; Wang 1993; Verellen 1989b). He studied Confucianism in early youth and took the civil service exams in Xizong’s reign before becoming a Daoist disciple. Diligent and eager to learn, Du was versed in both Confucian and Daoist classics. He also studied Daoist teachings, scriptures, history, and magic arts, and wrote many books during his lifetime (Luo 2004). Not surprisingly, the Daoist genius soon obtained numerous honors from the Daoism-friendly court. During Xizong’s refuge in Shu, Du helped the exiled court maintain liturgical practices that associated the emperor with sacred local sites and confirmed the Tang’s continuing mandate to rule (Verellen 1989a and 1998). Subsequently, Du accompanied the emperor back to the Tang capital, Chang’an長安, but soon headed back to the south. His peregrinations closely paralleled those of Wang Jian, and the two men likely came to know one another. Eventually, Du Guangting emigrated farther south to the inner Shu region, where he lived for the rest of his life and became an imperial priest of Wang Jian.

No source gives an exact date for Du Guangting’s initial involvement in Wang Jian’s government, but he enjoyed the ruler’s respect well before 907, and thereafter played an influential role at the Shu court. Understandably, both his reputation as an erudite scholar and his affiliation with the Tang
appealed to the new ruler. Wang Jian’s trust in the Daoist is reflected in reports that the ruler “frequently discussed state affairs with Du” (Sima 1956, 268.8773).

Doubtless, Du Guangting’s primary contribution to his new patron involved religious services that, like those he performed for Xizong, linked the new emperor to a divine mandate. These Daoist rituals constituted a significant part of Wang Jian’s legitimation. According to the Mount Xianju apocrypha of 912, Wang Jian enshrined a local saint named Zhang Hongdao 章弘道 as His Holiness Jiansheng 鑒聖真人 in response to an auspicious prophecy. Such an act, which “implied . . . a divine investiture of the king,” was further legitimated by a series of Daoist rituals under the instruction of Du Guangting (Verellen 1989a, 63; Du 1986, 13.62–3, 14.63–4, 16.72).

Franciscus Verellen cites another Daoist ritual performed by Du Guangting for the Shu emperor, officials, and members of the imperial family. Known as rituals of Personal Destiny (benming 本命), these practices, sponsored by members of the political elite on their birthdays, were supplications for good fortune, peace, and prosperity, both for the state and their families. “By obtaining divine protection for community leaders,” Verellen posits, “Personal Destiny rituals in fact conferred a form of investiture.” Wang Jian performed this grand ritual as part of his accession in 907, a year that coincided with his sixtieth birthday (Verellen 1989a, 68–73; Du 1986, juan 4–10). Sources also record many liturgical prayers drafted by Du for the emperor and the imperial family. These eulogize the merits of Wang Jian (Du 1986). By performing rituals and composing liturgical prayers, Du Guangting identified himself with the court and acted as a state priest whose religious services were closely bound with the political, military, and administrative affairs of the Shu.

Du Guangting was also renowned for compiling, interpreting, and disseminating portents, prophecies, and marvels — a talent Wang Jian utilized to help demonstrate his mandate. Du’s Record of Marvels (Luyi ji 錄異記) preserves many reports of auspicious portents, which, in his words, “were destined to occur” (Du 2000, 1506). Du’s role was to record and reveal the meaning of signs bearing Heaven’s will. When a portent was reported by local officials, he presented a well-written congratulatory memorial, which not only traced the historical precedent of the portent, but also predicted the future prosperity of Shu. In one such memorial, Du commented on a divine sword “discovered” at Hezhou 合州 (Hechuan 合川 in today’s Chongqing 重慶): “The First Emperor of Qin once found a sword in the center of a river and eventually swallowed the entire realm; now, Your Majesty finds a sword in a river, meaning that you will also unify the world” (Du 1986, 2.9–10). In 910, a county magistrate reported that a huge dam had formed miraculously overnight amidst a torrential storm, thereby spar-
ing Chengdu from floods. In a memorial congratulating the throne on the intervention of deities, Du vividly describes the marvel, an account preserved in his *Luyi ji* (Du 1986, 4.1527). Wang Jian surely appreciated Du Guangting’s gift for interpreting signs in a manner that reinforced his political authority. In 916, the emperor consulted Du about the meaning of a folk ballad that his expeditionary army retrieved from a battlefield in the north. Skillfully, Du linked the ballad to the ongoing war between Shu and Qi 岐 states (a regional power in today’s Shaanxi 陝西), claiming that the Shu ruler would soon “pacify the Three Qin regions and rule the world” (Du 1986, 2.7).

Du Guangting was highly effective at fabricating supernatural incidents to help legitimize the royal ascendancy of Shu rulers. Under his influence, the legendary Daoist immortal Wang Zijin 王子晉 was enshrined as ancestor of the royal house of Shu (Ouyang 1974, 63.792; Wu 1983, 44.652; Wuguo gushi, 1.12a; Yuan 1986, 35.19b). One of his famous collections concerning Daoist immortals, *Wangshi Shenxian zhuan* 王氏神仙傳 *Biographies of the Immortals in Wang Clan*), contains accounts of fifty-five Daoist deities and immortals with the surname of Wang and was obviously written to “adulate Wang Jian” (Chao 1968, 3B.305). In a prophecy cited in his *Luyi ji*, Du pictured the kingdom of Shu as a “sacred land” endowed with numinous qualities, suggesting a mandate from Heaven: “With its mountains and rivers, Shu is a blessed land. It has long been suited to serve emperors and princes as a capital. . . . If you remove the ‘insect’ particle from the character ‘Shu’ and write ‘gold’ [in its place], the character would appropriately mean ‘golden virtue.’ [The house of Wang] will rule in perpetuity as kings over this western region, and all the world shall bow to it (Du 2000, 2.1516). Clearly, both the interpretation of Shu’s “sacred geography” and the dynasty’s symbolic identification with metal are intended to establish Wang Jian as a destined and legitimate successor to the Tang. It is likely that Du invented the story and propagated it widely in Shu. Later eras, of course, regarded his collections of supernatural incidents as “fictional anecdotes” (*xiaoshuo 小說*). Later people even coined a term, “*duzhuan*” 杜撰, literally meaning “Du’s fabrication,” to refer to any incredible compilation (Yongrong and Ji 1997, 144.1908).² Wang Jian, however, surely favored such fabrications.

Du Guangting played other roles at the Shu court, as indicated by the large numbers of memorials that have been preserved to this day. In addition to his Daoist role, Du served as a senior advisor, directly participating in political and military decision making. In 911, when the emperor insisted on personally leading troops to defend the northern border, Du submitted two memorials in succession, trying to dissuade Wang Jian from endangering himself (Du 1986, 1.4). In 916, when Shu troops seized Longzhou 隴州 (Longxian 隴縣 of Shaanxi) from Qi, Du’s congratulatory
memorial celebrated the victory and praised the emperor's military merit (Du 1986, 1.5). In 916, as well, Du wrote a memorial that celebrated the completion of a grand palace (Du 1986, 3.12). In 917, Du wrote another memorial in support of Wang Jian’s decision to execute a surrendered general (Du 1986, 2.10).

Du Guangting also developed a justification for Shu’s massive military build-up and Wang Jian’s militancy, a stance obviously in contravention of Confucian ideals. In a supplication composed for a Daoist ritual sponsored by a magistrate, Du claims, “Within, [Wang Jian] subdues insurrection; without, he calms his borders. Still, he is unable to relinquish arms. When it comes to displaying the power of the Son of Heaven, and to wielding the general’s battle-ax, all depends on expediency and only opportunity matters” (Du 1986, 6.30; Verellen 1989a, 71–3). Elsewhere appears a similar argument intended to legitimize Wang Jian’s military deployments during an age of tumult. In the aforementioned memorial celebrating the appearance of yellow clouds, Du extols the Shu ruler for his benevolence, calling him a “sage king” who deployed armies only because “the Central Plains are still not at peace” and “used the military to save the people from exploitation” (Du 1986, 1.3).

In return for his support, Wang Jian generously rewarded Du. He received the special honor of “individually meeting and advising the throne,” without having to stand among other Daoist and Buddhist supplicants (Du 1986, 1.2). In 913, Du became Grand Counselor of the Golden Seal and Purple Ribbon (jinzi guanglu dafu 金紫光祿大夫), Imperial Remonstrator of the Left (zuojianyi dafu 左諫議大夫), and Duke of Cai (Cai guogong 蔡國公) with the sobriquet Gentleman of Great Accomplishment (Guangcheng xiansheng 廣成先生). Three years later, he was appointed deputy minister of the Board of Finance (hubu shangshu 戶部尚書), clearly demonstrating that he performed both as Daoist master and as civilian official (Du 1986, 1. 1–2; Luo 2003; Verellen 1989a, 64, 73–4). This unique status continued under the reign of Wang Jian’s son. After receiving a Daoist register in the palace, Wang Yan bestowed the title Celestial Master of the Dissemination of Perfection (chuanzhen tianshi 傳真天師) upon Du, an act that represented the summit of his career at the Shu court (Zhang 1964, 1.14b).

**Guanxiu & His Poems for the “Sage Ruler”**

Buddhism was also a major social force in medieval China, and it constituted another powerful tool by which Wang Jian attempted to legitimate his rule. After a brief setback in the mid-ninth century, Buddhism rapidly emerged as an important influence on the state and society in the late Tang and Five Dynasties (Li 1995; Cao 2005; Wang 1960, 52.11b–17b, 194.19a–20b, 821.23a–25a). Like Daoism, Buddhism enjoyed enormous popularity
during the Tang, which is widely considered a golden age of Chinese Buddhism (Weinstein 1987). Its popularity during the Shu was remarkable. “The people of Shu are addicted to Buddhism,” a tenth-century source confirmed (Li 1987, 238.1837). When a famous monk presented a lecture at Chengdu in 822, over ten thousand Chengdu citizens are said to have flooded the monastery (Zanning 1986, 6.22b). Many Shu governors in the late Tang were fond of Buddhism, such as the famous Cui Anqian 崔安潛 (Sun 2002, 3.57). When Xizong took refuge in Shu, the emperor extended his patronage to Buddhists, bestowing a purple cassock, a symbol of extraordinary imperial favor, upon a local Buddhist master (Cao 1960, 632.7246, 674.7710–1). Buddhism remained a state-endorsed religion after Wang Jian came to power. Some of his soldiers carried Buddhist sutras in one hand and arms in the other, according to a tenth-century account of the mania for Buddhism among the Shu people (Li 1987, 238.1837). The popularity of Buddhism in Shu during the Five Dynasties is also evidenced by the plethora of statues carved on hills throughout the region, many of which still survive (Yin and Zeng 1993).

Wang Jian publicly patronized eminent Buddhist monks. Learning that master Chuhong 處洪 had arrived from the north, Wang Jian established an exquisite monastery to accommodate his former mentor, who had encouraged him to join the army years ago (Liu and Peng 2002, 63A.636). In 895, Wang Jian invited another famous monk, Zhiguang 智廣, to preside over one of the largest temples in Chengdu (Gou 1964, 5.4b–5a). It is notable that a variety of Buddhist sects enjoyed similar favor. In early 901, the fame of a local Buddhist practitioner of the Tantric School named Liu Benzun 柳本尊 caught the attention of Wang Jian. The emperor summoned Liu to Chengdu and created a grand altar upon which to incant for three consecutive days (Hu 1993; Chen 2006; Wang 2001). Wang Jian’s interest in Buddhism is more clearly observed in his response to a special offering made by a monk. In early 908, a monk gouged out an eye and dedicated the sacrifice to Wang Jian — an extreme yet relatively popular act among Buddhists of the day to express their deep devotion to the faith. The newly enthroned emperor construed the sacrifice as a divine blessing and promised to host a vegetarian feast for ten thousand monks. Although Confucian officials dissuaded him from making this magnificent gesture in the end, the pledge clearly reflects the emperor’s zeal for Buddhism (Sima 1956, 266.8687–8).

Like his attitude toward Daoism, Wang Jian’s interest in Buddhism not only exhibited his respect for the religion but also reflected his effort to legitimize his own rule. A group of eminent monks assumed posts at court, playing a role similar to that of the Daoist priests. They contributed to the royal house and its rule by performing religious rituals and incantations. Three were granted the title “state masters” (guoshi 國師) (He 1964, 6.7a–b;
Wang Jian frequently visited Buddhist temples, listened to the lectures of masters, and celebrated Buddhist festivals with the citizens of Chengdu. Given the popularity of Buddhism in Shu, no ruler could afford to remain indifferent. Sources report that when an itinerant Indian monk reached Shu after a long journey, Wang Jian personally greeted the foreigner along with hundreds of thousands of devout Chengdu citizens. He must have seen the arrival of the monk from a distant “holy land” as a sign of broad recognition of his sovereignty. The arrival of the foreign master, in Du Guangting’s interpretation, was evidence that “the imperial compassion [of Wang Jian] had spread even to foreign lands,” indicating that “both the Chinese and barbarians are civilized [in Shu] where all the people enjoy happiness” (Du 1986, 2.10–11).

If Du Guangting represents Wang Jian’s cooperation with the Daoists, Guanxiu represents the Buddhist establishment’s support for the Shu ruler. A native of southeast China, Guanxiu was famed for poetry, which helped win him patronage among a number of regional potentates in the late Tang and early Five Dynasties (Zanning 1986, 30.10b–12b; SGCQ 47.669–72; Franke 1976, 55–61). By one account, Guanxiu once submitted a poem to his first political patron Qian Liu 錢镠 (852–932), the military potentate of Wu-Yue 吳越 (893–978), complimenting the governor for “pacifying fourteen prefectures with a single sword.” When Qian requested the monk to change “fourteen” to “forty,” suggesting an ambition to expand territory, the monk refused, insisting that he could not misrepresent reality (Shi 2003b, 73–4). Though historians are not likely to credit the anecdote, it vividly portrays Guanxiu as a stubborn, talented monk seeking patronage from the powerful, but unwilling to play the sycophant and compromise his dignity. Not surprisingly, the monk had difficulty getting along with his second patron, Cheng Rui 成汭 (d. 903), governor of Jingnan 荊南. It is said that one day when Cheng asked Guanxiu to teach him calligraphy, the monk declined, holding that such instruction deserved to be convened in a more formal manner (Tao 1986, 1.13b). Eventually Guanxiu, then in his seventies, moved to Shu in search of a better patron, inspired perhaps by Wang Jian’s reputation for favoring Buddhists and literati. It soon turned out to be a wise decision.

In the fall of 902, Guanxiu reached Chengdu and submitted his first poem to the Shu ruler, whose unification of the Three Chuan was nearly complete:

河北江東處處災，唯聞全蜀勿塵埃。
一瓶一缽垂垂老，千水千山得得來。

Disasters strike north of the Yellow River and southeast of the Yangzi;
I heard that the dust of war has alone eluded Shu.
Though terribly aged, I carried the canteen and alms bowl,
Contentedly arriving at Shu after crossing countless rivers and mountains. (Guanxiu 1965, 20.43)

The contrast between the tranquil Shu and the tumult elsewhere was no exaggeration. Thus, the eminent Buddhist master poetically cast the peaceful Shu kingdom under Wang Jian as a desirable and well-regulated locale. Upon reading the poem, Wang Jian was “overjoyed” and treated Guanxiu with beneficence, calling him “the Contented Monk” (dede heshang 得得和尚) — a term borrowed from Guanxiu’s poem. Wang Jian even kneeled before the Buddhist master’s table while addressing him. For a decade, until Guanxiu’s death in 912, the monk “consistently enjoyed the great favor of the Son of Heaven,” as one of his disciples observes, and in return made a special contribution to the legitimation of Wang Jian’s power (Guanxiu 1965, 53–4; Tian 2003).

While Du Guangting promoted the legitimacy of Shu mainly through religious services, Guanxiu’s primary vehicle was his elegant poetic verse. “As a Buddhist, I have nothing but poems with which to repay the imperial favor,” as he himself admitted (Guanxiu 1965, 19.41). A prolific number of poems are preserved today in Chanyue ji 禪月集 (Collection of the Zen Moon), an anthology compiled by a disciple in 923. The work contains many pieces written after Guanxiu entered Shu, some revealing his close relationship with the Shu ruler, some glorifying the merits of Wang Jian and justifying the ruler’s legitimacy.

The achievements of the Shu ruler are the main theme of Guanxiu’s poems. As in the aforementioned poem marking his arrival in Shu, Guanxiu used his poetry to evoke, with deft aesthetic sensibility, the peace and prosperity of Shu. In his description, “the land of Shu is peaceful and unified” and “people of all four classes [i.e., scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants] are newly revived and a wide domain enjoys stupendous wealth” (Guanxiu 1965, 5.12). In another poem, Guanxiu writes, “there is no war along your peaceful borders, crops mature in sweet-smelling paddies” (Guanxiu 1965, 16.35–6). Guanxiu brought a particularly Buddhist understanding of Wang Jian’s pacification of the Shu in a chaotic age, offering that “the ruler’s compassionate heart resembles that of the Buddha” (Guanxiu 1965, 20.43).

Guanxiu depicted Wang Jian as a ruler possessing both extraordinary talent and a deep commitment to the proper administration of his domain. After presenting a lecture to Wang Jian one day in 903, the master composed the following poem,
You command heroes [with the sincerity] of an untainted child,
You recruit worthy literati to compose beautiful pieces;
You [manage] the “six elements” of government with an anxious heart,
You destroy enemies with a sharp sword. (Guanxiu 1965, 19.41)

Here, Guanxiu’s verse effusively praises Wang Jian’s balanced use of military and civil power. The “six elements” in the third line refer to the policies adopted by the most diligent rulers in Chinese history: maintaining sobriety, encouraging education, exploiting geography, promoting the worthy, managing legal cases justly, and guaranteeing equitable taxes (Tian 2003, 71). Believing the Shu ruler to have succeeded in all these respects, Guanxiu judged Wang Jian qualified to oversee the world (Guanxiu 1965, 19.41).

On the emperor’s birthday in 908, Guanxiu drafted a long poem in five-character classical format to celebrate both the ruler’s birthday and the founding of the empire. The new regime was declared a reincarnation of the great Tang dynasty (“as prosperous as the enterprise of Tang”) and legitimate on this basis (“the mandate of the august Tang has been transferred”) (Guanxiu 1965, 16.35–6).

In his writings, Guanxiu frequently compared the Shu emperor to ancient kings and meritorious past emperors. In a series of poems, likely dated 904, celebrating Wang Jian’s climb to the top of a Buddhist pagoda, Guanxiu declared that the ruler was the reincarnation of Asoka (c. 300–232 B.C.E.), the great Indian king, as well as a ruler who cared for his people and country like the ancient sage king Yao (Guanxiu 1965, 19.41). These analogies definitely served to advance Wang Jian’s impending enthronement. In another composition written for Wang Jian’s birthday sometime after 907, the master pointed out that the founding of Shu was “consistent with the Mandate of Heaven” and Wang Jian was “a sage succeeding the ancient sages.” In his verse, Guanxiu placed the Shu emperor on par with the two great sage kings, Yao and Shun, writing that “the reign of [Wang Jian] will unquestionably last as long as that of Yao.” Guanxiu compared Wang Jian’s military talent to that of Han Gaozu 漢高祖 (r. 202–195 B.C.E.) and Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 627–49): “Your Majesty inherits Gaozu’s generalship and Taizong’s command of armies, your virtue expanding by the day” (Guanxiu 1965, 5.12).

Wang Jian surely appreciated the utility of Guanxiu’s poems, and he often visited the Longhua Monastery 龍華禪院, a chan temple specially built for the master, to listen to Guanxiu’s recitation of his newly written poems (Zhang 1964, 1.9b). The emperor’s reliance on Guanxiu extended even to practical matters of statecraft. He once led his adult sons on an expedition to visit the master, perhaps expecting Guanxiu to resolve the issue of imperial succession that was then vexing him (Zhang 1964, 1.9b; He 1964, 5.9b–10a).

Guanxiu spent the rest of his life in Shu and received many imperial honors, including a grand title believed to be the longest imperially bestowed designation in Chinese history (Wang 2005). Learning of the death of Guanxiu in late 912, the emperor “lapsed into deep sorrow for a long time,” arranging a dignified funeral with elaborate mourning rituals performed by both the Daoist and Buddhist groups at court (Guanxiu 1965, 54).

The Regional Ruler’s Religious Pragmatism

Like most of other potentates of his day, Wang Jian showed a deep preoccupation with supernatural phenomena and a fondness for the occult. Yet Wang Jian’s vigorous patronage of both Buddhism and Daoism was obviously part of the Shu ruler’s effective strategy to use the two popular religions to supplement other legitimation devices and boost the legitimacy of his regime. He believed religion should serve the state, not vice versa. This pragmatism is an important characteristic of Wang Jian’s response to religion over the course of his reign.

Wang Jian’s embrace of religion is understandable, for medieval Shu was known for its supernatural tradition. Occult practitioners had long enjoyed the patronage of aristocrats, high officials, and literati. Some military governors of Shu, such as Gao Pian 高駢 (d. 887), were known for their fascination with local sorcerers and soothsayers (Sun 2002, 11.238). Not surprisingly, this tradition had exerted a great influence on Wang Jian’s Shu. Extant sources preserve many records of the close association between Daoist divines and Shu imperial families and officials. Wang Zongshou 王宗夀, one of Wang Jian’s adopted sons, had himself practiced Daoist meditation in search of longevity (Lu 1964, 6.2b–3a). Confucian officials also came under the supernatural influence, as for example Feng Juan 馮涓, a leading civil advisor who composed a series of essays to eulogize the power of a sorcerer (Sun 2002, 390–1). A Daoist named Cui Wuyi 崔無斁, known for his accurate prophecy, was treated by Shu officials as a deity and addressed as “Venerable Master” (zunshi 尊師) (Huang 1964, 2.2b–4b).

Wang Jian was no exception to the influence of this religious culture. As early as 901, he expressed admiration for the supernatural powers of a
Buddhist who had subdued demons in a nearby river (Liu 1982, 6339–41). After his ascendance, he paid deference to a Daoist diviner, whom people believed to possess the power of foretelling the future, patronizing him at court for a few years sometime after 910. According to sources, when the diviner decided to leave the court, Wang Jian “wept” at his failure to persuade him to stay (Zeng 1986, 8.25b–26a; Li 1987, 86.558). Preoccupied with his mortality in his last days, the emperor sent Du Guangting to visit a diviner and solicit a prophecy about his life-span (Sun 2002, 403). He also turned to soothsaying to make decisions in state affairs. A source records that the emperor once summoned a group of Daoist soothsayers to the inner court, hoping that they could help select a qualified heir-apparent from among his sons based on their physiognomies (Sun 2002, 1.381–2). The emperor’s last religious gesture was the construction of his grand mausoleum, Yongling 永陵, where the stone base of Wang Jian’s coffin is surrounded by twelve statues of Daoist or Buddhist deities (Feng [1964] 2002; Shen 1993).

The religious zeal of Wang Jian, however, never compromised the emperor’s imperial authority or weakened his control over religious groups. Whenever a court diviner failed to make an accurate prophecy, Wang Jian lost his temper and reprimanded the poor Daoist severely (Wu 1983, 45.654). When he initiated a project to expand the palace, the ruler did not hesitate to destroy the famous Daoist abbey, Yuju hua 玉局化, one of the twenty-four divine Daoist abodes, to create space for it (Huang 1964, 2.2b–4b; Fan 1993). It seems that the ruler’s fondness for religion primarily stemmed from pragmatic considerations and, like many monarchs in Chinese history, the Shu emperor refused to compromise his political interests. When his authority was challenged by Daoists or Buddhists, Wang Jian handled them with a merciless iron fist. Sources record an aborted insurrection in Chengdu, led allegedly by a Daoist priest named Li Hao 李暠. The conspiracy was ruthlessly put down before it started, and Li Hao was executed on a Daoist holiday deliberately selected by the ruler (Sun 2002, 12.252–3). When they violated the laws, Buddhist monks did not escape severe punishment either. In 914, when the emperor visited a monastery in Chengdu, four of his court maids absconded. Apprehended a day later, the girls confessed that the monks in the monastery had enticed them to flee. The punishment that followed was extremely brutal: the four runaway girls and twenty-two accused monks were executed publicly (Zhang 1964, 1.10a–b).

In general, Wang Jian considered religion a political tool to use and control. He largely confined state priests to rituals or literary writings related to the mandate of the Shu. As a result, the state priests remained docile and seldom risked their fortunes by offending the ruler. According to one account, Du Guangting once received an audience at the palace. The emperor asked him if an imprisoned thief should be sentenced to death.
The Daoist, probably trying to shirk responsibility, merely muttered compli-antly and gave no clear answer. The emperor perhaps expected Du Guangting to beg for leniency, and when he did not, the monarch “had no choice but to kill the man” (Shi 2003a, 2.55).

Wang Jian’s association with the religious elite in the Shu illustrates the complex relationship between state and church in the chaotic early tenth century when warlords with humble origins erected regional regimes that required legitimation and local support. During this period, not a few military potentates looked to religion, particularly to Buddhism, to bolster their positions (Wang 1960, 52.11b–17b, 194.19a–20b, 821.23a–25a; Wuguo gushi 1964, 1.5a–b, 2.6a; Zhou 1964, 1.4b). Like his contemporary rivals, the Shu ruler eagerly patronized Buddhists, Daoists, and occult practitioners for both personal and political reasons. At the same time, those religious luminaries who survived the chaos of the era and enjoyed high status at the Shu court worked hard and skillfully in the interest of the regional ruler, offering not only hope for personal salvation and the wellbeing of the realm, but also helping to ensure legitimacy of the new emperor. As discussed above, the Daoist Du Guangting contributed his ritual, storytelling, and phenomenon-interpreting skills to the legitimation effort, while the Buddhist monk Guanxiu composed elegant verse in celebration of the Shu monarch and his pacific kingdom. Their services appealed strongly to Wang Jian, whose claims to “legitimate” descent from the Tang empire were always under challenge. The religious “adulators” and the “adulated” thus achieved a symbiotic balance that addressed the practical concerns of both priests and rulers amid the turbulence of the early Five Dynasties period.

Notes

1A prayer written for Wang Jian can be dated to 894–904 (Du 1986, 6.10a). Du’s writings elsewhere indicate that Wang Jian sought his advice as early as 896, sending envoys to his abode in Qingcheng Mountain (Du 2000, 8.1552).

2Sources give several other possible origins of the term duzhuan (Morohashi 1986, 6:154–5; Hanyu dacidian 2001, 4:753).

3More than one Indian monk must have visited Shu during Wang Jian’s reign. Sources record one visit sometime before 907 and the other in 918 (Gou 1964, 6.7a; Sun 2002, 2.405; Wu 1983, 115.1703).

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Religious Patronage in Tenth-Century China


