

Reconsidering the Story of Xu Xun, Patriarch of Jingming dao

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Some twenty years ago I first became aware of a set of album leaves held by the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Titled “Zhenxian shiji” 真僊事蹟, it tells the story of Xu Xun 許遜 (239-374) in a sequence of fifty-eight illustrations with accompanying texts. The signature and seal of the Suzhou painter Xie Shichen 謝時臣 (1487-1567+) appear on the initial illustration, with the date Jiajing 嘉靖 25 (1546).

According to a postface in the name of a certain Wang Gongkui, 王拱楨, also dated 1546, the “Zhenxian shiji” was meant to be presented to the Jiajing emperor. There is no evidence that it ever came into the possession of the emperor. The authenticity of the attribution to Xie Shichen also remains in question. Nonetheless, the value of the “Zhenxian shiji” as a testament to the vitality of the legacy of Xu Xun cannot be underestimated. It invites close examination in view of the vast body of hagiographic writings in the Taoist Canon concerning Xu Xun and his identity as patriarch of Jingming dao 淨明道.

Although I have worked on a collation of these texts off and on over the years, it is the invitation to participate in this Symposium, for which I am grateful, that has led me to take up the subject again. Here we will focus primarily on the ways in which the “Zhenxian shiji” both corresponds to and diverges from its closest counterpart in the 1445 woodcut Taoist Canon, the *Xu Taishi zhenjun tuzhuan* 許太史真君圖傳. This remarkable set of album leaves, we will find, is not only clearly derivative of canonic lore but is also unmistakably a product of its time.