CHAPTER FIVE

IMMORTALITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

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DESCRIPTION

Texts from the Eastern Zhou onward have maintained that human life can be prolonged beyond normal limits and that the body can be transcended. These notions, which may have grown out of the general human desire for longevity, have resonated in Chinese culture throughout its history. They preceded the formation of anything recognizably Daoist and have carried currency beyond Daoism: in medical theory and practice, in the performing arts, in popular narratives, in the martial arts and in Hong Kong cinema. Indeed, the language and lore of immortality have so thoroughly pervaded the common stock of Chinese ideas that they are no longer thought of as belonging specifically to Daoism, or even to religion in general.

However, these ideas were refined, discussed and written about most explicitly and most often in the context of Daoism. Becoming an immortal or transcendent has always been the goal of the Daoist adept. This change of state, this transcendence, has been understood as being equivalent to attaining the Dao by becoming one with it. As history went on, ideas concerning transcendence changed and immortality has been pursued in many different ways: by means of drug therapies, dietary restrictions, sexual regimens, breathing practices, meditations, talismans and gymnastic practices. People have attained immortality on mountain tops, in villages and in the capital. Peasants, beggars, merchants, officials, and empresses have become immortals. Transcendence has been a destiny, a reward for good deeds or for perspicacity, as well as a stroke of luck—all documented in an extensive corpus of biographies of immortals.

These texts (*xianzhuan* 仙傳) display considerable variation, but they also share the function of distributing knowledge of immortality and demonstrating its reality in concrete examples, and they were often circulated among the literate public. Biographical material is also found in other kinds of texts—ritual, topographical, revelatory—which in some cases had a circulation restricted to a religiously qualified audience and often present a different perspective on the subject. In any case, biographies of

immortals do not provide information on methods but instead focus on commemorating immortals and demonstrating their exemplary status.

History

EARLY REFERENCES. Certain terms, such as *changsheng* (prolonged life 長生) and *wusi* 無死 or *busi* 不死 (no death), first appear in the Eastern Zhou. They refer to an extended longevity on earth. In the Warring States period phrases like *chengxian* 成仙 (become an immortal) are found, which imply a change in one's state of being (Yü 1964, 87-93). The distinction between longevity and immortality is fundamental and has remained so in relevant discussions over the dynasties. Sometimes they are presented as different options, sometimes longevity is the first stage before the final goal of immortality; then again longevity is described as attainable while immortality is marked unreasonable and hocus-pocus.

Zhuangzi 莊子. The first literary description of an immortal appears in the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

> In the mountains of far-off Ku-yi there lives a daemonic [*shen* 神; spirit] man, whose skin and flesh are like ice and snow, who is gentle as a virgin. He does not eat the five grains but sucks in the wind and drinks the dew; he rides the vapour of the clouds, yokes flying dragons to his chariot, and roams beyond the four seas. When the daemonic in him concentrates it keeps creatures free from plagues and makes the grain ripen every year. (Graham 1986, 46; on the translation "daemonic," see Graham 1986, 35n.72)

Another description comes from the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

> The utmost man is daemonic. When the wide woodlands blaze they cannot sear him, when the Yellow River and the Han freeze they cannot chill him, when swift thunderbolts smash the mountains and whirlwinds shake the seas they cannot startle him. A man that yokes the clouds to his chariot, rides the sun and moon and roams beyond the four seas; death and life alter nothing in himself, still less the principles of benefit and harm. (Graham 1986, 58)

These passages exemplify the classic image of the immortal: a being with a purified body, who uses a special diet without grains and has the ability to fly, to roam afar and to heal. While later literature names such beings *xianren* 仙人 or *shenxian* 神仙 (immortals), the *Zhuangzi* uses *shenren* 神人 (spirit man) or *zhiren* 至人 (utmost man). It appears that the *Zhuangzi* was written when the idea of immortals had gained currency, but before the terminology had stabilized. In addition, neither passage occurs as part of a discussion of immortality; they are anecdotes used to make points in arguments about other things. Anecdotes about immortals occur in the *Zhuangzi*, but there are no records of their lives, details of their quest or practices.

Medical texts. Recently excavated texts from Warring States tombs also discuss aspects of immortality, focusing on various medical practices and longevity techniques. They are about *yangsheng* 養生 (nurturing life) and point to a "medical tradition of macrobiotic hygiene that had an active following among the elite by the late Warring States. The relation of this long-life hygiene to the ideas expressed in the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*, as well as to the beliefs and practices of the *xian* cult (with its goal of transforming the body to achieve immortality) requires investigation" (Harper 1995, 381). Such materials include the medical exercise manuscript *Yinshu* 引書 (Pulling Book), the illustrated *Daoyin tu* 導引圖 (Gymnastics Chart; see Despeux 1989), the *Wushier bingfang* 五十二病方 (Fifty-two Medical Recipes; see Harper 1982) and others (see Harper 1997). In many ways they link the search for long life in a medico-religious context with the ideas of the philosophers, suggesting a more integrated view of the early Daoist tradition.

THE IMMORTALITY CULT. The *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian) contains the first details of what may be called an immortality cult (Ôfuchi 1991), but it focuses largely on emperors searching for the secrets of life. Two emperors stand out: the First Emperor of the Qin (r. 221-210 B.C.E.) and Emperor Wu of the Han (r. 141-87 B.C.E.). They both centered their immortality searches in the ancient states of Qi and Yan (modern Shandong coastal Hebei and Liaoning), an area not only blessed with large numbers of magical practitioners but also geographically closest to the paradise islands of Penglai 蓬萊, thought to lie off the northeast coast. These isles, a group of five, were believed to rest on the backs of giant turtles, covered by wondrous vegetation and populated by immortal people and animals (see Smith 1990). The First Emperor, like some kings of the earlier Warring States and Emperor Wu later, sponsored voyages to them. He seems also to have been attracted by the far west as a numinous goal, and later sources firmly place him with Xiwang mu 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West) who lived on Mount Kunlun 崑崙 (see Smith 1992; Sôfukawa 1981). Emperor Wu's performance of the Feng and Shan 封禪 sacrifices was also an attempt to gain immortality (see Fukunaga 1954).

Both emperors associated with a group of people skilled in all sorts of unorthodox matters, "doctors, diviners and magicians" (DeWoskin 1983), called *fangshi* 方士 (though they never used the term to describe themselves). Some of them, like Li Shaojun 李少君 and Dongfang Shuo 東方朔, have biographies in the earliest collections *Liexian zhuan* and *Shenxian zhuan* (see below). They are also mentioned in Ge Hong's 葛洪 *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity, CT 1185) and some later texts, indicating that they became Daoist immortals *ex post facto*. The official histories regard them critically as charlatans or con-artists who deluded emperors with their wild tales and unsubstantiated

promises. However, they do include details of their practices, confirming that their activities were one of the important streams that fed into later Daoism (DeWoskin 1983; Kominami 1992).

Criticism of Emperor Wu's immortality-related activities is found in Wang Chong's 王充 (27-97) *Lunheng* 論衡 (Discussions Weighed in the Balance). For Wang, the *fangshi* were simply long-lived people who passed themselves off as immortals: the kind of immortality described in hagiographic collections was impossible (Forke 1962; Ôfuchi 1991). All living things must die, says Wang—just as ice must melt, so the *qi* that accumulates to become man must disperse. A similar viewpoint is adopted by the Late Han Confucian moralist Xun Yue 荀悅 (148-209) in his *Shenjian* 申鑑 (Extended Reflections). Like Wang, he denies the possibility of immortality in the sense that the body can be transformed and transcended, while accepting that long life is possible (Chen 1980).

Cao Zhi 曹植 (192-232), the son of Cao Cao 曹操, similarly produced an essay denying the existence of immortals. He insists that each person has a given span of life, some longer, some shorter, just as some people are strong and others weak. Whether one lives out one's entire span or only a portion depends on how one lives. He denies anyone's claim to immortality, suggesting that such persons were in fact charlatans and purveyors of falsity. A later essay of his, preserved in the *Baopuzi* (and possibly spurious), reveals a more tolerant attitude toward the subject, in that he accepts that there are certain things in the world that it is not possible to understand (Holzman 1998). Another early thinker, Ji Kang 稽康 (223-262), has a slightly more positive position. In his popular *Yangsheng lun* 養生論 (On Nourishing Life; see Holzman 1957) he maintains that immortality exists but is not generally attainable. Rather, it is fated at birth through the allocation of prenatal *qi*. Once equipped with *qi*, one still has to exert effort and undertake practices. Those not so fated can still extend their lives significantly by following the same immortality methods (Henricks 1976).

EARLY MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTS. **Tomb texts**. A few sources survive from the Later Han to elucidate religious ideas and practices at the popular level; most important among these are texts found in tombs. These tomb documents do not speak of the kind of immortality usually characterized as Daoist (see Seidel 1987a; Nickerson 1996), but are contracts that ensure the proper rights of the deceased to his grave and his safe passage to the underworld. The cultivation of life envisioned in them is a kind of "post-mortem immortality" (Seidel 1987b, 227), achieved through ritual and the preservation of the body (see Pokora 1985). This is unlike classical immortality or even *shijie* 尸解 (corpse-liberation or deliverance from the corpse), which was "one more technique to bypass death" (Seidel 1987, 232) requiring the adept to die an apparent death and

leave a stick or sword behind instead of his body. Still, the contracts reveal that ideas of permanence beyond the grave circulated among wider segments of the populace even in these early times.

In addition to tomb contracts, graves also contained bronze mirrors with inscriptions describing immortals and decorative representations of flying, feathered figures. Inscriptions and images are of nameless beings and the mirrors, like depictions of Xiwang mu and her companion Dongwang gong 東王公 (Lord King of the East), appear to be mainly markers of cosmic directions placed in the grave to give its inhabitant the proper orientation (Loewe 1979; Kominami 1997). Images of nameless immortals also appear in relief on brick and stone work and on painted surfaces in the Eastern Han and later dynasties (see Spiro 1990).

New insights into the history of immortality are being gained by the use of epigraphic sources. Three recent studies related to the cults of figures in the history of immortality indicate the potential of this kind of research, namely Holzman's study of the "Wang Ziqiao Stele" 王子喬碑 of 165 C.E. (1991) and Schipper's studies of the "Tang Gongfang Stele 唐公房碑" (1991) and the "Fei Zhi Stele 肥致碑" of 169 C.E. (1997).

The ***Taiping jing*** 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace), parts of which may date from the second century, contains many standard features of later immortality theory (Kaltenmark 1979), such as instructions on special diets, breathing techniques, moral behavior and drug therapy. It clearly distinguishes between longevity and immortality and establishes a series of nine graduated categories, with immortals ranking only fourth. Highest are divine ones or spirit beings who are without shape yet endowed with *qi*. Next come great divine ones, followed by perfected, immortals, personages of the Great Dao, sages, immortals the capable, people in general and slaves (see Kaltenmark 1979, 31).

A comparatively coherent and remarkably detailed picture of fourth-century immortality theory emerges from the ***Baopuzi*** on specific practices and the ***Shenxian zhuan*** on biographies, both attributed to Ge Hong (283-343). Ge was writing in the south at a time when refugees from the north were flooding into his region, and his work shows influences both from the indigenous religion of the state of Wu and from areas to its north and west. Immortals here are solidly human, reflecting the view that immortality can be attained through practice. The *Baopuzi* contains long lists of drugs and recipes and details rituals that are to be undertaken, stressing methodology over the belief. Its approach is thus instrumentalist rather than spiritual (Murakami 1962; Hu 1989; Ôfuchi 1991). However, it also presents a hierarchy of states of transcendence, explicitly recognizing immortals of three classes: heavenly, earth-bound and corpse-liberated. The realm of the heavenly immortals is named Taiqing 太清 (Great Clarity or Purity). Earth-bound immortals like Master Whitestone 白石公 (Baishi

gong) enjoy extended longevity on earth, have magical powers and can ascend at will. Corpse-liberated ones have lesser powers and must undergo a fake death to ascend.

The *Baopuzi* also categorizes medicines into various grades according to their efficacy, and devotes a chapter to cataloging the contents of the Daoist library of Ge's master Zheng Yin 鄭隱 (ch. 19) in which many titles name immortals or refer to immortal theory and practice. The *Baopuzi* thus evinces a tendency to systematize that is not apparent in the *Shenxian zhuan*, possibly because the latter was compiled from several different sources. Its biographies mention a variety of methods, powers and prerequisites, indicating that there was no single model of immortality in Ge Hong's time, but rather a variety of different ideas and practices (see Lai 1998).

Shangqing. Shortly after Ge Hong, and from the same region and milieu, Yang Xi 楊羲 (330-?), Xu Mi 許謐 (303-373), and Xu Hui 許翽 (341-c.370) began to receive revelations that ushered in the new Daoist dispensation known as Shangqing. The name Shangqing, "Highest Clarity" or "Supreme Purity," derived from the name of the heaven of the beings responsible for the revelations. The beings, known as *zhen* or *zhenren* 真人 (perfected) revealed themselves to be of a higher state and from a higher realm than had previously been known. Tao Hongjing 陶弘景, the editor of the Shangqing manuscripts, described the various heavens in his *Dengzhen yinjue* 登真隱訣 (Secret Instructions on the Ascent to the Perfected, CT 421). The following relies on Strickmann's summary (1979, 180):

1. Jade Clarity (*yuqing* 玉清) dwelling-place of eternal spirits who have never manifested themselves on earth.
2. Supreme Clarity (*shangqing* 上清) and
3. the Grand Ultimate (*taiji* 太極), both in the north, containing the palaces of the perfected (*zhen*).
4. Great Clarity (*taiqing* 太清), in the east, and
5. the Nine Mansions (*jiugong* 九宮) in the west over Mount Kunlun, both staffed by immortals (*xian*).
6. The Cavern Heavens (*tian* 洞天) beneath the earth, under the rule of the celestial-perfected, but peopled by terrestrial immortals and postulants for perfection (see also Miura 1983).
7. Fengdu 酆都, or Luofeng shan 羅酆山, also known as the Six Heavens 六天, Taiyin 太陰, or the Citadel of Night 夜城. An island in the far north, administrative headquarters of the unhallowed dead. It contains the dreaded Three Offices (*sanguan* 三官), the inquisition of the shades. Fengdu's authority extends over the numerous other abodes of the dead beneath mountains and rivers in the Central Kingdom itself, all of which are also included on this seventh level.

The perfected in the Shangqing heaven are superior to immortals of the Taiqing heaven, which was the limit of Ge Hong's knowledge. Nonetheless,

the perfected were also once human, and the Shangqing corpus contained six biographies of them. Only two survive: the *Peijun zhuan* 裴君傳 (*Yunji qiqian* 105) and the *Wei furen zhuan* 魏夫人傳 (*Taiping guang ji*). Both "are simply scriptures in which biographical information figures somewhat more prominently than technical matters" (Bokenkamp 1986, 144). The presence of these exalted beings and multiple heavens does not mean that the Shangqing idea of immortality struck out upon a completely new path. Its adepts were just as interested in the manufacture of elixirs as Ge Hong had been but were more ambitious in the goals they set for themselves. Indeed, many subjects of earlier biographies in Shangqing appear as highly spiritualized beings who are revealed by the perfected as office-holders in the heavenly hierarchy.

Lingbao. In the 390s, Ge Chaofu 葛巢甫, Ge Hong's grand-nephew, set about composing the scriptures that formed the core texts of the Lingbao school. These scriptures attempted "to fashion a compelling fusion of the most sublime religious knowledge of his day—the Taiqing tradition of meditative alchemy, the Shangqing tradition of personal apotheosis ... and the strains of Mahâyâna Buddhism currently popular in Jiangnan" (Bokenkamp 1990, 121). On the subject of immortality, the influence of Mahâyâna Buddhism is most strongly felt in the Daoist adaptation of the complex of ideas surrounding the doctrine of stages in the development towards Buddhahood. Lingbao doctrine, as other Daoist schools, maintained that aspirants could refine themselves step by step to reach perfection. As a new point it added Buddhist models to explain the immortal's progress, naming the stages and attributes in adaptation of Buddhist nomenclature and linking each level with a cyclic progression of rebirth.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS. The **Tang** did not see important changes in the theory of immortality, but the social position of Daoism, its relation to the state and its importance in Chinese culture and literature, was raised (see Kirkland 1986; Barrett 1996). As a result, immortals in the Tang are no longer marginal figures but occupy center stage. The best source of the period is the *Xuxian zhuan* (see below), which differs significantly from the two earlier collections.

The *Liexian zhuan* contains many biographies of sage kings and heroes of the golden age and their associates. Its immortals held court offices either as resident wonder-workers or in more conventional positions. This text also addresses a number of herb sellers and fishermen, but they are relatively few. In the *Shenxian zhuan*, by contrast, immortals and emperors usually meet by accident on the side of a road, and aristocrats hardly appear at all. Officialdom is only mentioned when the immortal either rejects the offer of a position or resigns from one on the grounds that it will inhibit his quest.

The immortal in the *Shenxian zhuan* is typically located on the fringes of society. He may sell drugs in the market by day and disappear into the mountains alone at night, he may set himself up in a cave and reject all company, or he may act the madman, going about naked and hairy, doing jobs everyone else rejects. Such immortals are, however, rarely anything but selfless in serving the community and their rejection of involvement is typically founded as much on the failings of society and government as on the desire to be alone to seek immortality.

The *Xuxian zhuan* is different from both collections in that it includes figures who are, or associate with, relatively well-known people in Tang history, such as Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (see Sivin 1968; Engelhardt 1989), one of the fathers of Chinese medicine. Zhang Zhihe 張志和, for example, a friend of the famous calligrapher Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, receives a biography, as does Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎, court Daoist extraordinaire. These are people at the heart of society, not outside it. Another new feature appears in that these characters are often associated with an organized religious structure. Immortals like these often travel to sacred mountains on a religious tour, stay at large temples, are linked with established figures of the tradition and address audiences that can be reached through a religious network. In other words, they operate within a society, in this case an organized Daoist society, but a Daoist society that is integrated with society at large.

"For Daoism, the Tang was a period of consolidation and integration... The Tang Daoists in this respect were simply continuing the work begun during the fifth century, but they went about it much more methodically and systematically" (Robinet 1997, 190). During this period we see the first urge to systemize hagiography, most notably expressed in the works of Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933). His *Yongcheng jixian lu* 墉城集仙錄 (Record of the Assembled Immortals of the Heavenly Walled City, CT 783) stands as a monument to the desire to catalogue and classify immortals (Verellen 1989). Other texts by Du have been lost—for instance, his *Xianzhuan shiyi* 仙傳拾遺 (Supplementary Biographies of Immortals) originally in 40 j., and the *Wangshi shenxian zhuan* 王氏神仙傳 (Biographies of Immortals of the Wang Family) in 5 j.—but it is likely that their contents are actually found, unacknowledged, in later sources. In addition to formally religious works, the institutionalized power of Daoism in the Tang also shows itself in literary works, which are replete with Daoist tropes and metaphors (see Schafer 1977; 1983; 1985; Cahill 1993).

With the **Song dynasty** also came imperial sponsorship of Daoism, and with imperial sponsorship came text production. For hagiography, this meant the compilation of more and larger systematizing works both of citations like the *Sandong qunxian lu* and of complete biographies like *Lishi*

zhenxian tidao tongjian (see below). These two works attempt comprehensive coverage of the immortals of the past. In the latter case, individual biographies—some of them a whole chapter in length—appear to include all traditions up to the point of compilation. To take one example, the biography of Zhang Daoling 張道陵 in *Lishi tongjian* is rather verbose with an inclination to provide lavish detail. It is often written in parallel four-word phrases in contrast to the earlier records. It contains most, if not all, of the anecdotes and episodes from Zhang's life as recorded in earlier biographies and has an anonymous interlinear commentary (mostly concerned with identifying places mentioned in the main text) that appears to be based on Du Guangting's works. In general, the *Lishi tongjian* appears to be a biographical collection that is keen to organize previous traditions and to rewrite them into what may be called acceptable Song style.

Imperial sponsorship of secular works of the period also showed the influence of Daoism: the *Taiping guang ji* and *Taiping yulan* both give prominence to Daoist matters, and the *Taiping guang ji* in particular is an important source for biographies of immortals (esp. chs. 1-55; 56-70 [*nüxian* 女仙]). With the advent of new Daoist schools in the Song came a need to commemorate their founders and lineages. Thus the **Quanzhen** 全真 (Complete Perfection) school produced several collections of biographies of their patriarchs, their founder and his followers that are preserved in the Daoist canon (Boltz 1987, 64-68). Associated with this material are also extra-canonical works in novel form, used to popularize the foundational figures of Quanzhen (Boltz 1987, 279-80; Endres 1985; Wong 1990). There are also hagiographic texts associated with the Qingwei 清微 (Pure Tenuity) and Jingming 淨明 (Clear Brightness) traditions (Boltz 1987, 68-78). These new religious developments all claimed antecedents in both historical time and on a cosmic scale, and their hagiographical collections functioned to document a lineage of authority or practice. In a similar way, although this was not a new development, the Celestial Masters' lineage produced records of their forebears—the earliest surviving of these being the *Han Tianshi shijia* 漢天師世家 (Genealogy of the Celestial Masters since the Han, CT 1463)—through the lineage's contemporary representatives.

As noted earlier, the history of immortality ideas and the lives of immortals is dependent on texts, so that our discussion is limited by a dearth of surviving documents. Extant texts do not provide a complete picture of how ideas of established religious circles interacted with those from more popular or ephemeral sources. As we get closer to the present, more texts survive and so it becomes possible to examine the lives and careers of immortals in more nuanced ways. Three important cases of individual figures will conclude this part of the chapter.

Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 stands at the head of the best known group of immortals: the **Eight Immortals** 八仙, each of whom has particular

iconographic attributes (see Eberhard 1986). Lü is depicted as a scholar with a fly-whisk and a demon-slaying sword. Zhongli Quan 鐘離權 (a.k.a. Han Zhongli) often shows a bare stomach and carries a fan that resurrects the dead. He discovered the elixir in the Han and during the Tang brought Lü Dongbin to immortality. Li Tieguai 李鐵拐 (Ironstaff Li) has a crippled leg, an iron crutch and a gourd from which a bat flies. He adopted the body of a beggar after his disciples, taking him for dead, burnt his original body while his spirit was off wandering. Cao Guoqiu 曹國舅 is dressed as an official and carries the insignia of office. He Xiangu 何仙姑—a young woman—carries a ladle or a lotus flower and was seduced by Lü Dongbin. Han Xiangzi 韓湘子, supposedly the nephew of the Tang Confucian Han Yu 韓愈, carries a flute. Zhang Guolao 張果老 is old, rides a donkey (sometimes backwards) which, it is said, he folds up like paper when he has reached his destination. He also carries a tubular drum. Following instructions in a dream, he met Li Tieguai and received a pill that conferred immortality to him. Finally, Lan Caihe 藍采和 (who may be depicted as male or female) carries a basket of fruit or flowers and sometimes a flute (see Yetts 1916; 1922; Yang 1958; Lai 1972).

The Eight Immortals do not appear as a group until the Yuan (although the number eight is consistent for numerological reasons) and it is in dramatic rather than religious texts that this tradition appears (Yang 1958). In these plays Lü appears as the hero, characteristically transforming tree-spirits and scholars into immortals. During the Yuan and early Ming the membership of the eight is not stable. The escapades of the group remained a popular topic in drama and prose (see *Dongyou ji* 東遊記 [Journey to the East]) and has pervaded both folklore and visual representations, including postcards, comic books and movies.

Patriarch Lü (Lüzu 呂祖), as Lü Dongbin is also known, is traditionally dated to the second half of the Tang, though the earliest records of him are from the early Song. Lü's accession to immortality is told in the famous story of the "Yellow Millet Dream" in which he is made aware of the worthlessness and mutability of earthly success. The innkeeper, who prepares the millet while Lü dreams an entire life, turns out to be Han Zhongli. In addition, early versions of Lü's legend show him as a specialist in inner alchemy, a calligrapher and poet, a purveyor of drugs both medicinal and transcendental, the possessor of healing ink, a patron of mediums and exorcists, a soothsayer, a merchant and artisan and a Buddhist (Baldrian-Hussein 1986; see also Katz 1996).

Chen Tuan's 陳摶 status as a pivotal figure in Song Daoism was established by the inclusion of his biography in the orthodox history of the dynasty (trl. Kohn 1990a). That record accepts Chen's transcendent status and notes his marvellous feats, including his extraordinary diet, "sleep" meditations, and precognitive abilities as well as his meetings with Lü

Dongbin and Mayi daozhe 麻衣道者 (the Hempclad Daoist). However, its main focus is on Chen's interactions with the imperial government. His particular status is clearly related to his statements concerning the accession of the Song. The tradition surrounding Chen can be traced through various Song sources, going back to his status as founding saint and his skills as a physiognomist (see Kohn 1990b). Chen also appears in Yuan drama, which doubtless played an important role in the popularization of his reputation (see also Katz 1996), and among the Chan-Buddhist monks of Mount Huangbo 黃檗 (Fujian) from where his legend and cult were transmitted into Japan (Russell 1990).

The third figure is **Zhang Sanfeng** 張三丰, originally a Daoist master on Mount Wudang 武當山 who came to the attention of the early Ming emperors Taizu and Chengzu and was granted an honorific title by Yingzong in 1459 (see Seidel 1970). Material relating to these aspects of his life is available in non-religious sources. In Ming local gazetteers and *biji* 筆記, Zhang was transformed into a Song or even Tang figure and variously granted meetings with Lü Dongbin and Chen Tuan. He performed the range of standard immortals' tricks and acquireed the nickname "Dirty Zhang" on account of his disdain for cleanliness. He also appeared in many wondrous places, leaving tokens and transmitting knowledge. Subsequently, he was hailed as the founder of Taiji quan 太極拳, a master of sexual self-cultivation and a god of wealth. His fame also spread through collections of revelations to the compiler of his widely circulated collected works. Later revelations were delivered both in direct meetings and in spirit writing. At some point after the Ming, he was adopted into the Quanzhen pantheon and is honored today in the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 in Beijing.

Texts

Information concerning the lives of immortals can be found in numerous sources in and outside the Daoist canon. Some of the collections are comprehensive, while others are heterogeneous; some are based on a sect or lineage; others are anthologies of citations or compendia (see Chen 1985, 233-51; Boltz 1987; Yan 1976; Li 1986, 187-224).

Liexian zhuan 列仙傳 (Immortals' Biographies, CT 294, in 2 j.), attr. to Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-6 B.C.E.), 70 biog., appended hymns (trl. Kaltenmark 1953; see Campany 1996; Smith 1998). The biographies are short and rarely exceed two hundred characters; the authorship of the surviving hymns is disputed. Investigation of citations shows that portions of text from the biographies have been lost. A preface, found in some versions, is also not regarded as reliable.

Few of the biographies contain proper life-stories; most present the bare bones of a narrative while conforming to the generic demands of a Chinese biography: stating name, courtesy name, native place (or "No one knows where he came from"), and the period in which he or she lived. The biographies are arranged in a broadly chronological order, beginning with Chisongzi 赤松子(Master Redpine) who lived "in the time of Shennong 神農." Some have long and flourishing Daoist careers, such as Huangdi 黃帝(Yellow Emperor), Pengzu 彭祖, Wang Ziqiao王子喬, Laozi 老子, and Yin Xi 尹喜. Others are known from historical records and played a part in court life under the Qin and Western Han—including figures such as Anqi Sheng 安期生 and Dongfang Shuo. Others again are entirely unknown.

Shenxian zhuan 神仙傳 (Biographies of Immortals, *Daozang jiyao*, 10 j.), by Ge Hong (283-343), 90-odd biog. (trl. Güntsch 1988; Fukui 1984; see Fukui 1951; Kominami 1974, 1978; Sawada 1988; Penny 1999). The ascription to Ge Hong is by no means certain, but he does claim credit for the text's compilation in his autobiographical essay, as well as in a possibly spurious preface to the *Shenxian zhuan*. There also exist references to his authorship in Pei Songzhi's 裴松之 commentary to the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (completed before 429) and in biographies of Tao Hongjing (456-536).

The *Shenxian zhuan* is much longer than the *Liexian zhuan* with modern versions including over ninety, often extensive, biographies. Modern editions follow early bibliographical information in dividing the collection into ten chapters. What becomes clear on examination of the surviving editions is that they are all reconstructions undertaken after the destruction of the Song canon. To add to the difficulties in ascertaining the reliability of the extant versions, the Tang Buddhist scholar Liang Su 梁肅 (753-793) claims that the *Shenxian zhuan* which he knew contained 190 biographies. The biographies in the *Shenxian zhuan* have very complex and detailed narratives, often including several different episodes in the life of the immortal, as well as more standard introductory material concerning their upbringing and early life. The biographies sometimes relate signs of impending transcendence and often detail the stages in the immortal's progress to his or her final goal. Usually, the method of gaining immortality is recounted and there are several "deathbed" scenes. There is even, in one case, a vision of heaven vouchsafed with a description of the deified Laozi.

The *Shenxian zhuan* has many of the first biographies of important Daoist figures, including Zhang Daoling, Ge Xuan 葛玄, and Lord Mao 茅君, as well as Laozi and Pengzu, Wei Boyang 魏伯陽, Hugong 壺公, and Liu An 劉安. In all cases the focus of the biography is on the major figure as an individual with little or no emphasis on their place in a lineage or tradition. The *Shenxian zhuan* provides superb source material for the view of immortality during the fourth century, showing what the lives of immortals

were like, what powers they had, with whom they interacted, how they related to the government and local spirits, what medicines they concocted, and which spiritual exercises they practiced.

Xuxian zhuan 續仙傳 (Immortals' Biographies, Continued, CT 295), by Shen Fen 沈汾, dat. 5 Dyn., 3 j. The first chapter has sixteen biographies of those who "ascended in flight" (*feisheng* 飛昇), the second, twelve about those who "transformed in secret" (*yinhua* 隱化, i.e., by corpse-liberation), and the third eight more of people in the same category. This clear organization is a feature not seen in earlier collections, although the fragmentary nature of the *Shenxian zhuan* denies the opportunity of seeing how it was originally arranged.

The figures in the *Xuxian zhuan* are largely from the Tang and often also important in civil or literary history, so that the *Xuxian zhuan* is the first collection in which it is possible to find extant sources for some of the biographies. The editors of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete Books in the Four Storehouses) noticed that sources for the biographies of Zhang Zhihe, Xie Ziran 謝自然, and Xu Xuanping 許宣平 can be found in the collected works of Yan Zhenqing, Han Yu, and Li Bo 李白 respectively. In addition, Kirkland (1986) has shown that the biography of Sima Chengzhen is based, at least in part, on Liu Su's 劉肅 *Da Tang xinyu* 大唐新語 (New Tales of the Great Tang).

Xianyuan bianzhu 仙苑編珠 (A String of Pearls from a Garden of Immortals, CT 596), by Wang Songnian 王松年, dat. 5 Dyn., 3 j., 123 biog., see Boltz 1987, 59. Setting the pattern for later collections, this contains extracts from a number of pre-existing collections, often associated with the Shangqing school and compiled on Mount Tiantai 天台山. Under a single heading it groups extracts of two biographies together, for instance "Lord Jie 介君—a bamboo staff; Zuo Ci 左慈—wooden shoes." In an unfortunately large number of cases citations are unattributed, although many are. Exactly why the sources for some citations are given and some are not is unclear, but it is possible that Wang may not have worked from original texts.

Sandong qunxian lu 三洞羣仙錄 (Record of the Host of Immortals of the Three Caverns, CT 1248, 20 j.), by Chen Baoguang 陳葆光, dat. 1154 (see Boltz 1987, 59). An important source for lost records, this text claims to have been compiled as proof that immortality was something anybody could attain by working hard and not a matter of fated destiny only available to a few. The argument between these two views echoes through the history of immortality. The text should be used with care as its attributions show disturbing inconsistencies, and some citations from the same biography are credited to different source texts. Occasionally attributions are simply impossible—the source for the biography of Ge Hong is twice given as the *Shenxian zhuan*, and among figures said to be

recorded in the *Shenxian zhuan* two lived under the Five Dynasties and one during the Tang. To add to the confusion, the *Sandong qunxian lu* also cites biographies from texts such as the *Taiping guangji*, which are themselves collections of citations.

Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian 歷世真仙體道通鑑 (Comprehensive Mirror through the Ages of Perfected Immortals and Those Who Embody the Tao, CT 296, 53 j.), by Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1294-1307), 900-odd biog. (see Boltz 1987, 56). Additional collections: *Lishi tongjian xubian* 續編 (Appendix, CT 297, 5 j.) on later immortals; *Lishi tongjian houji* 後集 (Supplement, CT 298, 6 j.) on women. The text proper arranges biographical notices in approximately chronological order with a few deviations, notably in the inclusion of a chapter on later Celestial Masters after the biography of Zhang Daoling. Frustratingly, only a few sources are mentioned. In some cases, however, one can see that Zhao copied chapters of extant collections across into his compendium, also occasionally disrupting the chronological ordering. On the other hand, Zhao did not copy early collections indiscriminately, replacing certain notable biographies from early collections with later much longer versions. Some of the biographies in the text are comparatively long, such as those of Huangdi and Zhang Daoling; some even take up entire chapters. The tendency in these long biographies is to include all the material from previous traditions in one record.

The two supplementary collections appear to derive from Quanzhen circles. Boltz has observed that the *Xubian* begins with biographies of Quanzhen patriarchs while the *Houji*, a collection devoted to women, culminates with the record of Sun Bu'er 孫不二, the Quanzhen matriarch.

Guang liexian zhuan 廣列仙傳 (Extensive Immortals' Biographies, ed. *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書, 7 j.), by Zhang Wenjie 張文介, dat. 1583, 304 biog. The text is based on 55 source works, including collections of immortals' biographies, orthodox historical works, mountain treatises, philosophical texts, and works of belles lettres. It begins with a record of Laozi and ends with Wang Tanyang 王晏陽, whose biography is credited to the great Ming poet and literatus Wang Shizhen 王世貞. It is comparatively long and is the only biography where a specific source is given. The text is distinctive for the inclusion of figures who did not usually find their way into collections of immortals' biographies, such as Lü Shang 呂尚, Ji Kang, Wu Daozi 吳道子 and Bo Juyi 白居易.

WORLDVIEW AND PRACTICES

PREREQUISITES. One of the recurring issues in discussions of immortality is whether it is a goal universally attainable or merely the fate of a certain select few. The idea that one's fate determines one's length of life as well as many other aspects of that life is common throughout Chinese history. In biographies of immortals, however, fate is not usually mentioned, except in those cases when fate played a major role in the subject's immortality. The most common evidence cited for being fated to become an immortal is physiognomic, the possession of "immortal's bones." The linking of physiognomy with fate also has a venerable history, and the connection is usually explained using the correlations of five phase theory (see Kohn 1988).

With this in mind it is no surprise that other personal features can be understood in these terms; data on the time and date of birth and the meaning and numerology of names are also used to denote someone as destined for immortality. However, in some instances, an immortal simply knew when they encountered someone who was also fated for immortality—their evidence is not vouchsafed to the reader of the biography. In other cases, the fact that the subject of a biography was able to meet an immortal was proof enough of their being fated to transcend.

Being fated, however, only indicates a possibility—a willingness and ablility to learn also needs to be proven. This proof takes the form of testing the aspirant's determination and trust in what is usually a series of trials in which failure is sometimes the outcome. For instance Fei Changfang 費長房, the acolyte of Hugong, showed no fear when left alone with tigers and did not move when a huge rock that was suspended above his head on a flimsy cord was about to be gnawed through by snakes. Unfortunately, he recoiled from the third—eating excrement infested with inch-long worms (see DeWoskin 1983; Giles 1948).

Personal virtue was another key feature, growing into a major issue in the Song schools but already apparent in early texts, such as the *Taiping jing*. Moral behavior is a necessary requirement, but not usually a sufficient one. However, the biographies more often note cases where the aspirant's morality was not acceptable: the locus classicus for this is Emperor Wu who did not succeed in achieving everything he might have by reason of his behaviour as emperor, his arrogance and love of luxury and the spilling of blood in his empire.

METHODS OF ATTAINMENT. In most cases, where someone was fated to become an immortal someone who had already attained that state informed him of it; these meetings are one of the ever-present features of narratives of immortality. Such encounters with immortals can assume various forms: sometimes they are a quiet rendezvous in an isolated and

numinous place, typically a mountain; sometimes the immortal makes his or her appearance in the public arena, often accompanied by an invisible retinue, revealed to those present by the music they play; sometimes the immortal hides his true identity until the aspirant has proven himself worthy. These encounters serve as models for the personal transmission of teachings from master to disciple, and many include the transmission of a text, a recipe, or restricted knowledge (see Smith 1994). The presence of the spirit world in the lives of immortals is also evident in the appearance of the "travelling kitchen-feast" (*xingchu* 行廚; see Stein 1972).

The preferred way of attaining immortality is ascension to heaven in broad daylight: the lucky subject simply rises into the air and disappears amongst the clouds, often accompanied by spirits of various kinds (see Kohn 1990c; Sunayama 1987). The ability to ascend is often linked to the actual physical lightening of the body through drug therapies. Biographical records commonly report the ascension as the conclusion of their narrative. One exception is that of Liu An, whose elixir subsequently gets lapped up by the local chickens and dogs, who also ascended into the sky, so that "the cackling of chickens and the barking of dogs could be heard from the clouds."

The next best option of becoming immortal was corpse-liberation which entailed resurrection after passing through what appears to be a kind of false death (see Robinet 1979; Seidel 1987a). Corpse-liberation is sometimes described as "leaving through transformation" (*huaqu* 化去), an instructive term indicating that the process involved a change of category of being. Those to be transformed into immortals in this manner typically predict their own passing, then appear to die but vanish, leaving only their grave clothes behind. Often great heat and extreme weight loss are reported to be generated by such people, while the transformation is expressed in images of a cicada shedding its carapace or a snake shedding its skin.

A common variation is to place a substitute item in the grave: a talisman, a bamboo stick or a sword. The conclusion to the narrative of corpse-liberated immortals is often a report of one or more sightings of the resurrected person—apparently alive and well in some other place. Such sightings serve to authenticate their passage through death. It should be stressed that in corpse-liberation, "it is not one or several 'souls' that go on to be purified and then return to revive the corpse—it is unmistakably the physical body that undergoes restoration" (Seidel 1987a). Seidel also notes that typically corpse-liberation only occurs after the adept has practised some exercises of a meditative, alchemical or moral kind prior to death.

In many biographies no specific method of transcendence is mentioned; rather, the biographer simply makes a statement that so-and-so "departed as an immortal" (*xianqu* 仙去). The context or general description often makes clear what process is involved. Nonetheless, even in biographies that

include detailed descriptions of the attainment of immortality, there are no specific instructions. They provide models to emulate but an active seeker will have to go elsewhere to find out the methods.

POWERS. The attainment of immortality brings with it extraordinary powers, and the list of spectacular feats is very long. One can divide them into several broad categories (see also Güntsch 1988; Kohn 1993, 290-99).

First are those feats that are usually described as transformations (*bianhua* 變化), which include magical changes of the immortal's own body as well as those of other objects (see Robinet 1979). The latter category is simply changing one thing into another, such as turning goats into white rocks. Making food and wine is one of the most common forms of transformation, either feeding many people from a single serving or making food and wine from inedible objects. Transformations of the immortal himself range from adopting an animal's body for a specific purpose, to disappearance through merging with objects in the surroundings, to multiplication of the body and being in different places simultaneously.

Second, immortals gain extraordinary bodies. The signs of aging have been expunged from them; they have black hair, all their teeth (including some regrown) and youthful complexions. In addition, immortals often appear to have extraordinary abilities. They can walk great distances in a day, run at great speeds, possess great strength and are impervious to extreme temperatures (see Robinet 1986). Like the perfected in the *Zhuangzi*, they can "enter water without getting wet and fire without getting burnt"—an almost proverbial statement in the texts. Some can enter walls or dive into the earth; others know how to fly or levitate. Some may have auras above their heads; others yet again show signs of wondrous, even freakish, physiognomy (see Kohn 1996).

Third, immortals have the ability to control objects, animals, and people. This control is explained in terms of *qi*, the life-force that pervades all existence. Harnessing it, immortals can control the evil or dangerous activities of animals, ghosts and mountain sprites. Through it they can inhibit bleeding, aid in the restoration of broken bones, prevent being cut by swords and cure snake bites. In addition, they can create extraordinary and indelible writing, shrink the earth, relieve drought and cover great distances in mysterious ways.

Fourth, immortals are able to heal diseases. Here again the records are heterogeneous and there is more description than instruction, so that the outline of a cure, or its ability, may be presented without elaboration. Still, certain methods are common: acupuncture, moxibustion, herbs, talismans and talisman water. In addition, some can cure from a distance; others have medicines delivered by spirits. Some even perform the ultimate form of healing—bringing the dead back to life. Others again are exorcists, ridding

suffering people from disease and cleansing temples or districts of evil spirits (see Stein 1979).

Fifth and finally, immortals can predict the future—be it that they know the time of their own transformation or are able to see the future of others. They may even foresee the rise and fall of dynasties, emperors and great players on the political stage.

DIET. Diet forms an important part of immortality training, and certain diets have been indicative of special attainments. Not to eat grain is a primary dietary prohibition, explained by the nourishment that grains give to the three worms or deathbringers (*sanshi* 三尸) who eat away at people's life. It also is related to the immortals' rejection of a settled agricultural life and its interrelations and various social duties in favor of an eremetic, mountain-dwelling, more floating existence (see Levi 1983). An extreme version of abstention from grains is not eating at all, which also appears as a mark of the attainment of immortality.

Special diets include ingestion of crabs and clams, white stones, dried meat and jujubes, as well as that of more chemical concoctions, such as the famous elixirs of the alchemists. In addition, immortals eat unusual vegetable and mineral substances, such as Atractylis root, cypress fruit, needles or resin, deerhorn powder, water cassia, stone marrow, lead, solomon's seal root, asparagus root, quicksilver, sesame seeds, mica, fungi or excrescences and cinnabar. The *Baopuzi* has long lists of things that can be ingested and also tells the keen reader what each substance can be expected to do for them (see Akahori 1989).

IMMORTALS AND THE STATE. Immortals have played pivotal roles in the founding and legitimation of dynasties, typically by predicting the rise of a future founder. The classic example is Zhang Liang 張良, credited in later texts as the ancestor of Zhang Daoling, who received a text of military strategy from the immortal Huangshi gong 黃石公 (Master of the Yellow Stone) and assisted the first emperor of the Han to come to power. Zhang Liang was enfeoffed for his service to the dynasty (see Bauer 1956). Another famous example is Wang Yuanzhi 王遠知 (d. 635), the tenth Shangqing patriarch, said to have met Li Yuan, the founder of the Tang, and predicted his rise to emperor (Chen 1985; Yoshikawa 1990). Similarly, Chen Tuan and Zhang Sanfeng predicted and played a role in the legitimization of the Song and Ming (see Kohn 1990b; Seidel 1970).

These examples of imperial legitimation through foreknowledge can be seen as a subset of prediction of the careers of politicians and statesmen in general, and they are not always predictions of achievement; for every successful career predicted, there is one where an unexpected downfall is foretold. These predictions are often couched in obscure language, to the extent that the meaning of the immortal's utterance is not clear until after the events have taken place. Within the biographies' narratives these *ex post*

facto validations of what appeared to be mad ravings serve as a retrospective authentication of the reality of the immortals' transcendence.

Just as fundamental to the relationship of the immortal to the state is their consistent rejection of summonses to attend court. This is, of course, a trope common to the biographies of exemplary scholars as well as to immortals (see Vervoorn 1990) but the regularity of its appearance in the biographies should be noted.

SYMBOLS. In the visual arts, certain objects and animals have become understood as symbols of immortals and immortality (see Little 1988). Some have gained these meanings by virtue of their important place in immortality culture. Preeminent among these is the gourd (sometimes termed bottle-gourd to distinguish it from the melon) which serves to carry herbs or other powerful substances. Also the dwelling place of some immortals, such as the Gourd Master, the gourd metaphorically indicates the alchemical furnace and the cosmos in microcosm. It is related symbolically to grotto heavens and other spaces where the inside is bigger than the outside (see Miura 1983; Stein 1990).

Another symbol is cinnabar, the oxide of mercury that plays a major role in alchemy and has taken on a symbolic life in the prevalence of the color red as a token of good fortune. Then there is the pine or cypress tree whose nuts, resin, and needles were among the most commonly recommended drugs for the prolongation of life. The pine stands for longevity in part because it is longevous and evergreen, conquering the seasonal death that winter brings; in addition it is traditionally planted on graves, thus in immortality symbolizing the overcoming of human death. Finally, pines are favourites in miniature cultivation and play an important role in the world of microcosms. They have this feature in common with strangely shaped rocks, which symbolically show the immortals' island of Penglai.

Among foodstuffs, peaches are most prominent, such as those conferred by Xiwangmu, and the "numinous fungus" on which aspirants nibble is a key symbol of longevity. Among animals, besides the dragons who come to pick up the successful trainee, cranes have been central at least since Wang Ziqiao, who ascended on one, and Magu, who had nails "like talons." Cranes are long-lived birds and serve as riding animals for immortals. Like pines, they appear to have connotations with the grave as well as with immortality (Schafer 1983; Spring 1993). Birds in general have an affinity with immortals, who may be depicted with feathers (see Kaltenmark 1953). Besides indicating their physical lightness and ability to fly, this may be related to the belief that ancestral spirits return to their temples on the seventh day of the seventh month in the shape of birds (see Kominami 1978).

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