

Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy 14

David Chai *Editor*

Dao Companion  
to *Xuanxue* 玄學  
(Neo-Daoism)

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# Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy

Volume 14

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# Chapter 22

## Seeking Immortality in GE Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian*



Fabrizio Pregadio

### 1 Introduction

GE Hong 葛洪 (283–343 CE) is one of the main figures in the history of Daoism. Born near present-day Nanjing into a family of the southern aristocracy, which had provided officials to the state administration for at least ten generations before him, he became a disciple of the Daoist master, ZHENG Yin 鄭隱, at the age of fourteen and studied under him for five years. He later served the imperial administration in various capacities. His main work, *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱朴子), is divided into the twenty *Inner Chapters* (*Neipian* 內篇), mainly devoted to discussions of Daoist ideas and practices, and the fifty *Outer Chapters* (*Waipian* 外篇), dealing with the “discourses of the literati” (*rushuo* 儒說). In addition, GE Hong is ascribed with some sixty works on classical exegesis, dynastic and local history, Daoist thought, alchemy, medicine, numerology, hagiography, and various other subjects. No more than a dozen of these works are extant, and only two of them may indeed have been written by him, namely the *Biographies of the Divine Immortals* (*Shenxian Zhuan* 神仙傳) and the medical text, *Recipes for Emergencies to Keep at Hand* (*Zhouhou Beiji fang* 肘後備急方).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A detailed “chronological biography” (*nianpu* 年譜) of GE Hong is found in Chen 1980: 47–94. The autobiography found in the last chapter of the *Waipian* is also included by WANG Ming 王明 as an appendix to his edition of the *Neipian* (i.e., *Baopuzi Neipian Jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋) which will serve as the base text for this chapter. Translations are found in Ware 1966: 6–21 and Che 1999: 31–51. See also Campamy 2002: 13–17, which presents a biography of GE Hong in the Introduction to his translation of the *Shenxian zhuan*. On the works attributed to GE Hong, see Chen 1980: 143–198.

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Although GE Hong has often been called “the greatest Chinese alchemist” or in similar ways, he states twice in his work that he had never compounded an elixir (Wang 1996: 71, 283; Ware 1966: 70, 262). His figure as an alchemist is largely a creation of Daoist hagiography and was endorsed by Confucian literati. Nonetheless, the *Inner Chapters*, with which the present chapter is concerned, provides unique insights into the intellectual and religious traditions of GE Hong’s time. Although he was not a master of any of those traditions—his main concern, as we shall see, was the acceptance of that legacy by other literati—GE Hong’s account makes the *Inner Chapters* an essential source for the study of early Daoism, especially due to the background information it provides on several concepts, beliefs, and practices, and to the large number of quotations from early sources, most of which are now lost.

The figure at the center of the *Inner Chapters* is the “immortal” (*xian* 仙 or *xianren* 仙人), a term that has multiple connotations in GE Hong’s usage, ranging from a person who has transcended the limits of human existence to a person who might be more plainly called a “sage.”<sup>2</sup> Both of these senses should be taken into account to understand GE Hong’s views. To appreciate this aspect of his thought, two earlier essays on the *Inner Chapters* are especially valuable. In a study that goes much beyond the subject announced in its title, LAI Chi-tim has explored the expansion of the range of issues debated by literati after the Han period. Lai calls attention to several points, closely related to one another. The decline of Han dynasty Confucian orthodoxy prompted enquiries “into the transcendent and eternal realm beyond the natural world.” Six Dynasties literati, as a consequence, “became more conscious of enquiring the ground of one’s ‘natural’ self-identity regardless of the existing ‘social’ identity.” As part of this process, literati became increasingly aware of “the issue of the transience of human life” (Lai 1998: 186–192). These issues were actually not only of concern to Confucian literati: they also informed—and paved the way for—the development of intellectual and religious trends within Daoism and Buddhism in Six Dynasties and later times. In fact, one might add a further point to those mentioned by Lai: the same developments resulted in the creation of multiple instances of self-cultivation praxis that are not strictly limited to ethical and moral refinement, but require in addition the performance of practices focused on the mind, the body, or both. Within this broad context, a new view of immortality emerged, which differs from the earlier beliefs in beings who live in far-away paradises, and the cults addressed to them, and instead is “only dependent upon ascetic, mystic, and ethical behavior” (Lai 1998: 199). Lai suggests that GE Hong takes as his own ideal the so-called “earthly immortal,” a transcendent being who, instead of ascending to heaven, opts for living among fellow human beings. This immortal “is the opposite of the Confucian sage” in the classical sense but, like the Confucian sage, performs a beneficial function within human society (Lai 1998: 210–211).

The figure of the “sage” is at the center of another important essay on GE Hong, which shares several underlying points with Lai’s study despite the different focus.

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<sup>2</sup>I have opted to translate *xian* and *xianren* as “immortal” rather than “transcendent” in this chapter. As we shall see, according to GE Hong the *xian* “do not die as ordinary people do.” Whether he understands deathlessness in a physical sense is an issue I discuss below.

As Michael Puett shows, GE Hong's sage is a human being provided with exceptional capabilities (acquired primarily through study) that he uses in order to devise methods through which other people may cultivate themselves. There follows—as we shall see in the first part of this chapter—that in GE Hong's view Confucius is not the only sage, and that sagehood cannot be limited to what is written in the Confucian Classics. GE Hong presents himself as a “new sage,” or rather as “the sage of his day.” He expounds this new view of sagehood in a voluminous work in two parts (the *Inner* and the *Outer Chapters*) that attempts to combine aspects of the Confucian heritage with parts of the body of technical traditions that developed during the late Warring States and the Han period. As Puett notes, in expanding the scope of the figure of the sage, GE Hong's views bear analogies with those of WANG Chong 王充 (27–97 CE).<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which GE Hong frames his discourse on immortality. Taking into account GE Hong's intended audience is essential for this task. GE Hong's work is not addressed to Daoists, in whatever way they might be defined. The greatest part of the *Inner Chapters* is framed as a series of imaginary dialogues in which GE Hong enters into a conversation, with an attitude that is firm, but not polemical, with an “interlocutor” who is, in fact, GE Hong's own Confucian *alter ego*. As we shall see, the key point made by GE Hong is probably the only angle under which an ordinary Confucian might have accepted his entire discourse: attaining immortality depends on one's destiny and is ultimately owed to the “mandate of heaven” (*tianming* 天命). That destiny should be fulfilled, and the teachings and practices concerning immortality are the means to fulfill it. The *Inner Chapters* is devoted to the illustration of this thesis.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Sagehood, Immortality, and Destiny

GE Hong's discussion of immortality is tightly integrated with his views of sagehood and destiny: immortality is an aspect of sagehood, and whether one is committed to the search of transcendence uniquely depends on destiny. Before we approach the main subject of this essay, it is important to clarify this aspect of GE Hong's thought.

<sup>3</sup>See Puett 2007, especially pages 102–104 on the figure of the sage, pages 111–12 on the integration of two bodies of knowledge, and pages 109–110 on the analogies with WANG Chong.

<sup>4</sup>Except for the final quotation, all translations from the *Inner Chapters* in this essay are mine. However, I provide references to the complete English translation by James Ware (1966) and (where relevant) to the excellent partial French translation by Philippe Che (1999). In the title of Che's translation, the “discursive chapters” are those in which GE Hong focuses on general matters, such as the search of immortality, instead of alchemy, meditation, and other technical subjects. In addition to these translations, and to the studies quoted in the previous footnotes, I have benefited from several other works; in particular, Murakami 1967 and Hu 1989.

According to GE Hong, there is more than one kind of sage (*shengren* 聖人). In the main discussion of this subject, his interlocutor challenges him by saying that, if immortality could be attained, all sages would be immortals. The fact that Confucius and the Duke of Zhou were not immortals proves, instead, that immortality is unattainable. GE Hong responds that not all sages are immortals, and not all immortals are sages in the sense meant by his opponent. Only a few persons would be able to devote themselves at once to the affairs of the world and the search of transcendence. However, he continues, sagehood has different aspects and applications, and the art of government is only one of the skills that qualifies one as a sage. As he shows with several examples, the title “sage” is granted to anyone who excels in a particular domain: history, medicine, divination, painting, sculpture, music, military strategy, and several other pursuits.<sup>5</sup>

When the interlocutor disagrees with this view, maintaining that sagehood “should embrace all and form a whole,” GE Hong replies that sagehood, on the contrary, “is divisible” (*you poupan* 有剖判). He supports this argument with two examples that his opponent could hardly dismiss. In the *Mengzi* 孟子 we read that each of Confucius’ disciples obtained only one part of the Master’s sagehood. Moreover, the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) states that sagehood has four different facets: speaking the right words, achieving good results, conforming to models, and producing correct prognostications.<sup>6</sup> One may thus be a sage in a particular field of expertise. If this understanding of sagehood is rejected, GE Hong concludes, then even Confucius and the Duke of Zhou, who were prominent in the art of government but not in other domains, could not be called “sages.”<sup>7</sup>

Whether one does or does not attain the status of “sage” in any particular pursuit is owed to destiny. GE Hong maintains that individual fate, including the predestination for immortality, is something received as a “natural endowment” (*ziran suo bing* 自然所稟) in accordance with the star (or “asterism, constellation,” *xiu* 宿) under which one is conceived. He illustrates this concept with a quotation from the now-lost *Classic of the Jade Seal* (*Yuqianjing* 玉鈐經):

A man’s good and bad fortunes take form on the day the embryo is formed and receives its *Qi*: everyone receives the essence of an asterism above. If one happens to be in conjunction with the sagehood asterism, one becomes a sage; with the worthiness asterism, a worthy man; with the civil asterism, a man of the civil arts; with the military asterism, a man of the military arts; with the honors asterism, an honored man; with the riches asterism, a rich man; with the humbleness asterism, a humble man; with the poverty asterism, a poor man; with the longevity asterism, a man of long life; with the immortality asterism, an immortal.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Wang 1996: 12.224–225; Ware 1966: 200–202; Che 1999: 157–159.

<sup>6</sup> *Mengzi*, 3.2 (Legge 1895: volume 2: 193); *Yijing*, “*Xici* 繫辭” (Appended Sayings), A.IX (Wilhelm 1950: 314). In all four of these actions, according to the “*Xici*,” one should follow the words and images of the *Classic of Changes*.

<sup>7</sup> See Wang 1996: 12.225–226; Ware 1966: 202–203; Che 1999: 159–160. On this part of GE Hong’s discourse, see also Lai 1998: 211; Puett 2007: 102–105.

<sup>8</sup> The extant text entitled *Yuqianjing* seems to have little or nothing in common with the work known to GE Hong. Other quotations from this work, which clearly was quite influential for GE Hong, are found in Wang 1996: 3.53–54 (see the discussion below) and Wang 1996: 17.301–302; Ware 1966: 284.

玉鈐經主命原曰：人之吉凶，制在結胎受氣之日，皆上得列宿之精。其值聖宿則聖，值賢宿則賢，值文宿則文，值武宿則武，值貴宿則貴，值富宿則富，值賤宿則賤，值貧宿則貧，值壽宿則壽，值仙宿則仙 (Wang 1996: 12.226; Ware 1966: 203–204; Che 1999: 160).

Various mixed destinies can also occur (for instance, being honored but not rich or being rich but not honored), but the main point is that here, according to GE Hong, lies the meaning of the “mandate of heaven” with regard to individual existence. With another argument that few Confucians could challenge, GE Hong states that only the mandate of heaven can explain whether one is or is not destined to become an immortal:

One who is not fated to become a divine immortal will certainly not have his heart drawn towards immortality. No one has ever sought for such things without having a heart fond of them, and no one has ever found them without seeking. From antiquity down to the present there have been eminent and bright persons who do not believe in the existence of immortality, but there have also been very ordinary persons who attain immortality by study. The former know many things but in some way are blind to immortality; the latter are ignorant of much but have an uncommon understanding of its principles. Could you say that this is not caused by the mandate of heaven?

苟不受神仙之命，則必無好仙之心，未有心不好之而求其事者也，未有不求而得之者也。自古至今，有高才明達，而不信有仙者，有平平許人學而得仙者，甲雖多所鑒識而或蔽於仙，乙則多所不通而偏達其理，此豈非天命之所使然乎 (Wang 1996: 12.226; Ware 1966: 204; Che 1999: 161).

As understood by GE Hong, however, heaven does not operate on the basis of deliberate intent or purposive choice. In another dialogue, the interlocutor states:

The August Vault, being divinity in its highest form, should be just in the fates it metes out. If ordinary persons such as Wang Qiao and Chisongzi received a long life free from death, why did great sages such as the Duke of Zhou and Confucius fail to receive the favor of “enduring presence”?<sup>9</sup>

皇穹至神，賦命宜均，何為使喬鬆凡人受不死之壽，而周孔大聖無久視之祚哉 (Wang 1996: 7.136; Ware 1966: 124; Che 1999: 107).

GE Hong answers with the same concept seen above: the length of life depends on the star under which one is conceived. Then he adds an important detail:

Whether one is destined to a long or a short life is actually owed to a conjunction: on receiving *qi* and taking form as an embryo, everyone is related to an asterism. The Way of heaven does nothing: it leaves everything to the nature of each creature. There is no question of close or distant relationship, and no distinction between “this” and “that” ... One’s preferences are determined by one’s endowment; heaven can neither change it nor transform it, neither add to it nor subtract from it.

命之脩短，實由所值，受氣結胎，各有星宿。天道無為，任物自然，無親無疏，無彼無此也 …… 所樂善否，判於所稟，移易予奪，非天所能 (Wang 1996: 7.136; Ware 1966: 124; Che 1999: 107).

<sup>9</sup> Wang Qiao and Chisongzi are two well-known immortals of antiquity. The expression *jiushi* 久視 “enduring presence” derives from *Daodejing* 道德經 chapter 59.

Destiny is thus not due to heaven's intention: Heaven is an entirely impersonal power that merely oversees the functioning of the coincidental mechanism of "conjunction." This means that heaven has no preferences and makes no distinctions, and also clarifies the sense of a statement, first found in the *Baopuzi* among extant texts, that would become a leitmotif in the later Daoist views of fate: "My destiny is in me, it is not in heaven 我命在我不在天" (Wang 1996: 16.287; Ware 1966: 269).<sup>10</sup> This destiny is more than a "potential" for immortality, and probably also more than a "vocation" (as Isabelle Robinet called it) to seek immortality: it is an actual endowment with which one is born.<sup>11</sup> However, as we shall see, this destiny needs to be fulfilled through the teachings of a master and the performance of adequate practices.

### 3 Daoism and Confucianism

Addressing himself primarily to other literati, GE Hong is aware that his attempt to make a subject such as the search of immortality admissible in the eyes of a Confucian exposes major points of contention between Confucianism and Daoism. GE Hong approaches this issue from two main angles: first, Confucius himself acknowledged the primacy of Laozi, and second, one cannot expect that the Confucian Classics cover every dimension of human experience.<sup>12</sup>

Someone asks, says GE Hong, why Confucius met Laozi but did not become his disciple.<sup>13</sup> In light of what we have seen above, the answer is predictable: one's qualities determine one's values, and both depend on "spontaneous destiny" (*ziran zhi ming* 自然之命). Because of his destiny, Confucius "was only anxious about education (*jiaohua* 教化) and did not give consideration to the practices (*fangshu* 方術)" (Wang 1996: 7.139; Ware 1966: 129; Che 1999: 112). Understanding Confucius' limitations, Laozi only granted him general advice about self-cultivation:

Although Confucius was a sage in the affairs of the world, he could not attain quiescence and silence, integrity and non-doing. Therefore, Laozi admonished him by saying: "A good merchant stores things so deeply that he appears to have nothing, and a noble man with flourishing virtue appears to be a fool. Dispense with your proud airs and many desires, your self-assured appearance and excessive ambitions. None of this will benefit your

<sup>10</sup>GE Hong quotes this sentence—which in fact is a line of a poem—from another lost work, the *Writ of the Turtle Shell* (*Guijia wen* 龜甲文) "My destiny is in me, it is not in heaven / the Reverted Elixir (*huandan*) forms gold, and I live millions of years 我命在我不在天, 還丹成金億萬年." On the intellectual and historical context of GE Hong's view of destiny, see Lo 2010.

<sup>11</sup>See Robinet 1997: 88.

<sup>12</sup>What I call "Daoism" here and below corresponds to what GE Hong calls *daojia* 道家 in chapters 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 18, and 19 of the *Inner Chapters*. The term *daojiao* 道教 does not occur in the *Inner Chapters*.

<sup>13</sup>The main early source for the tales of Confucius' meetings with Laozi is the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. As we shall see, however, GE Hong refrains from quoting this text in his discussion of this subject, and refers instead to a work more suitable to his Confucian opponent.

person.” This is sufficient to know that Confucius was not devoid of ordinary qualities and was not a man who studied immortality.

仲尼雖聖於世事，而非能瀟靜玄默，自守無為者也。故老子戒之曰：良賈深藏若虛，君子盛德若愚，去子之驕氣與多欲，態色與淫志，是無益於子之身。此足以知仲尼不免於俗情，非學仙之人也 (Wang 1996: 7.139; Ware 1966: 129–130; Che 1999: 112).

GE Hong carefully avoids quoting any Daoist text about the meeting between Confucius and Laozi, and draws instead Laozi's advice from his biography in the *Shiji* 史記.<sup>14</sup> Relying on the same source, he points out that Confucius himself acknowledged Laozi's eminence:

After he respectfully asked questions [about the rites] to Boyang (i.e., Laozi), Confucius wanted to compare himself with Old Peng (i.e., Pengzu). Moreover, when he admitted that he knew fish and birds but did not know dragons, and made an analogy between Master Lao and a dragon, this was certainly an expression of his genuine belief, and not a meaningless statement.<sup>15</sup>

仲尼既敬問伯陽，願比老彭。又自以知魚鳥而不識龍，喻老氏於龍，蓋其心服之辭，非空言也 (Wang 1996: 7.138; Ware 1966: 129; Che 1999: 111).

From here, the step to an explicit assertion of the superiority of Daoism over Confucianism is a short one. The interlocutor insists that while Confucius said that everyone must die, Laozi maintained that one can become immortal; this simple fact shows that the sayings of the Daoists are untrustworthy.<sup>16</sup> GE Hong replies by pointing out why people follow Confucius and reject Laozi regarding this and other subjects: the majority complies with the views of Confucius because they are simple; the teachings of Laozi, instead, are difficult and thus few follow them. Yet, Dao is the “source” and Confucianism is a “stream”:

Confucianism is simple and easy to grasp, therefore, those who honor it are many. The sense of the Dao is remote and difficult to comprehend, therefore, those who attain to it are few. The Dao is the source of multiplicity; Confucianism is a stream of the Great Irrigator ... Why only give importance to Confucius and treat Master Lao lightly? This is like enjoying the flowers on the branches of a tree without knowing that what gives life to them is the root.

儒教近而易見，故宗之者衆焉。道意遠而難識，故達之者寡焉。道者，萬殊之源也。儒者，大淳之流也 ..... 何獨重仲尼而輕老氏乎？是玩華藻於木末，而不識所生之有本也 (Wang 1996: 7.138; Ware 1966: 128; Che 1999: 111).

Facing the straightforward question of which between Confucianism and Daoism is more important, GE Hong uses again the “root and branch” analogy:

Someone asks about the priority between Confucianism and Daoism. I reply: Daoism is the root of Confucianism; Confucianism is a branch of Daoism.

<sup>14</sup> *Shiji*, 63.2140. See Csikszentmihalyi 2006: 103.

<sup>15</sup> The episode of the dragon is first reported in chapter 14 of the *Zhuangzi*, (see Guo 1961: 524–525; Watson 1968: 163), but is also found in the *Shiji*, 63.2140 (Csikszentmihalyi 2006: 103). For Confucius comparing himself to Pengzu 彭祖, see *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*), 7.1 (Legge, *The Confucian Classics*, volume 1: 195).

<sup>16</sup> Confucius' statement is found in *Lunyu*, 12.7: “From of old, death has been the lot of all men.” See Legge 1893: volume 1: 254.

或問儒道之先後。抱朴子答曰：道者，儒之本也；儒者，道之末也 (Wang 1996: 10.184; Ware 1966: 165; Che 1999: 146).

Here again, GE Hong avails himself of an earlier literatus to support his view: after his reply, he summarizes SIMA Tan's 司馬談 essay on the "six schools" (*liujia* 六家) in the *Shiji*, where the "Daoist school" (*daojia* 道家) is praised as superior to all others, including Confucianism.<sup>17</sup>

Resorting again to the authority of one of the main Classics, GE Hong then points out that the Dao is not limited to the arts of "nourishing life" (*yangsheng* 養生), but is the principle through which the early sages determined the foundations of social and individual life, and of sagehood itself:

Can Dao really be nothing more than the pursuit of nourishing life? The *Classic of Changes* says: "They (i.e., the sages) established the Way (Dao) of heaven, and called it Yin and Yang; they established the Way of Earth, and called it the yielding and the firm; and they established the Way of Man, and called it benevolence and righteousness." It also says: "In the *Changes* there are four principles of the sage"; and [it says:] "If you are not the right kind of person, the Way will not manifest itself in vain."<sup>18</sup>

夫所謂道，豈唯養生之事而已乎？易曰：立天之道，曰陰與陽；立地之道，曰柔與剛；立人之道，曰仁與義。又曰：易有聖人之道四焉，苟非其人，道不虛行 (Wang 1996: 10.184; Ware 1966: 166; Che 1999: 147).

Then he adds:

Nowadays, we only know how to praise the arts of Confucianism, but we ignore that they have taken form from the Dao. The Dao is that through which the hundred schools of thought were molded, the two principles [of Yin and Yang] were cast, the ten thousand species were gestated, and all laws and norms were brewed.

今苟知推崇儒術，而不知成之者由道。道也者，所以陶冶百氏，范鑄二儀，胞胎萬類，醞釀彝倫者也 (Wang 1996: 10.185; Ware 1966: 167; Che 1999: 148).

When the interlocutor objects that GE Hong's words are not credible, pointing out, once again, that most famous and eminent men are not immortals, GE Hong surrenders and replies that he is only "an ordinary person of modest talents" (*yongfu jincai* 庸夫近才); although he has experienced certain aspects of the Dao, he would not try to convince one who is unable to understand. He adds, however, that it would be impossible to expect that everyone follows the Dao: "There are certain truths that one cannot understand, and certain good words that one cannot practice ... If one sees a dragon and calls it a snake, it does not mean that the dragon is devoid of divine qualities" (Wang 1996: 7.140–141 passim; Ware 1966: 131–134; Che 1999: 114–117).

<sup>17</sup> *Shiji*, 130.3289. See Roth and Queen 2000: 279 and 281–82. SIMA Tan's essay is likely to describe what in his time was known as Huang-Lao Dao 黃老道.

<sup>18</sup> The three passages quoted from the *Classic of Changes* are found in "Shuogua 說卦" (*Explanation of the Trigrams*), II, and in "Xici," A.IX and B.VII (Wilhelm 1950: 264, 314, and 349), respectively. As mentioned above, the "four principles" are the word, the action, the use of tools that are in agreement with proper models, and the ability to predict by divination.

Other statements of GE Hong on this subject are even more critical towards Confucianism than those reported above.<sup>19</sup> What interests us here, however, is a different point. The relatively few but (in GE Hong's eyes) conclusive instances in which Daoism, the Daoist view of the Dao, and Laozi himself are portrayed in positive ways in works by literati form the basis—in conjunction with his view of destiny—for his discussion of one of the most controversial subjects relevant to the search for immortality. His opponent raises the issue of withdrawal from society, saying that it would not be possible to devote oneself at the same time to human affairs and to the search for immortality. GE Hong first answers that for a person of great talent it would actually not be difficult to attend to both. In the following passage, he alludes to the analogy between governing the country and governing oneself, a theme prevalent in early Daoism, but not unknown in Confucianism.<sup>20</sup>

He governs his person and his person endures through time, he governs his country and his country enjoys great peace. He teaches the six Classics to ordinary people, and he transmits the practices to those who are like him.<sup>21</sup>

治身而身長修，治國而國太平。以六經訓俗士，以方術授知音 (Wang 1996: 8.148; Ware 1966: 136; Che 1999: 118).

Most of those who devote themselves to the search of immortality, however, opt for life in retirement: "Each follows his inclinations, and we cannot judge everyone in the same way."<sup>22</sup> His opponent asks who then would take care of the country. GE Hong cites several examples of persons who were uninterested in honors and favors and did not actively contribute to government and society, but were nevertheless held in high esteem. Since men like those are extremely rare, why should one worry that "the ruler has no ministers?"<sup>23</sup> The next objection is that no one should turn their backs to the sovereign in order to search for immortality. GE Hong counters that if some people withdraw from society, they do not harm the country; and in any case, most of those who withdraw from the world would have no talent for government. In addition, "the rulers who possess Dao are magnanimous and forgiving," and they allow certain people to live in retirement.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>For instance: "Confucians love power and advantage, Daoists treasure the absence of desires ... Confucians discuss the treatises on [the art of] grinding one another. Daoists practice teachings and precepts to eliminate emotions 儒者所愛者勢利也，道家所寶者無欲也 ... 儒者所講者，相研之簿領也。道家所習者，遣情之教戒也。" Wang 1996: 10.187–188; Ware 1966: 172; Che 1999: 153.

<sup>20</sup>See *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan* 春秋公羊傳), 6.322b: "The kingdom and its ruler form a single body 國君為一體。"

<sup>21</sup>According to GE Hong, those who did so included the Yellow Emperor, Laozi, and Zhuangzi.

<sup>22</sup>Wang 1996: 8.149; Ware 1966: 137; Che 1999: 119.

<sup>23</sup>Wang 1996: 8.152; Ware 1966: 143–144; Che 1999: 124–126.

<sup>24</sup>Wang 1996: 8.152–153; Ware 1966: 144–145; Che 1999: 126–127.

## 4 The Case of LIU Xiang

One further point deserves notice, as it provides a clear example—albeit a negative one—of how the search of immortality is closely related not only to one’s destiny, but also to the requirement of finding a master who provides the means to accomplish that destiny. In the *Inner Chapters*, GE Hong mentions several times the case of LIU Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE), one of the main Han dynasty literati, but also famous for a failed attempt at producing gold through an alchemical method.<sup>25</sup> GE Hong takes great pains to explain the reason of that failure, in order to prevent LIU Xiang’s lack of success being taken as evidence that the methods for attaining immortality are untrustworthy. “Ordinary people,” he writes, “say that since LIU Xiang did not succeed in making gold (*zuo jin* 作金), actually there is no such Way anywhere in the world. This would be as if a farmer unable to harvest because of a flood or a drought says that one cannot obtain the five cereals by sowing.”<sup>26</sup> GE Hong first points out that not only LIU Xiang was a learned scholar, but he is also ascribed with the authorship of the *Biographies of the Immortals* (*Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳), the earliest known collection of tales on transcendent beings.<sup>27</sup> If those beings did not exist, a man of such standing and learning would have not created stories about them:

LIU Xiang was most erudite; thus he could investigate the subtle and reach the utmost of the wondrous, go through the deep and walk across the remote. Using his reasoning, he was able to distinguish the true from the false and to establish whether something did or did not exist. In his *Biographies of the Immortals* he mentions more than seventy immortals. If they actually did not exist, for what reason would he invent them?

劉向博學則究微極妙，經深涉遠，思理則清澄真偽，研覈有無，其所撰列仙傳，仙人七十有餘，誠無其事，妄造何為乎 (Wang 1996: 2.16; Ware 1966: 41–42; Che 1999: 68–69).

According to GE Hong, therefore, LIU Xiang should not be deplored simply because he wrote tales about the immortals. The reason why he failed in his alchemical endeavors is a different one: he had not received proper transmission and instructions from a master. In GE Hong’s view, this is equivalent to saying that LIU Xiang was not destined to become an immortal. He explains LIU Xiang’s failure by saying that he had received from his father an alchemical text supposedly authored by the King of Huainan, LIU An 劉安, when the latter was standing trial for rebellion:

LIU Xiang’s father, De, took possession of that text when he was in charge of the case of the King of Huainan; it was not transmitted by a master. LIU Xiang was fundamentally unable to understand the arts of the Way. He happened to catch sight of that text and said that its meaning was entirely written on paper. This is why he did not succeed in making gold.

<sup>25</sup> See Needham et al. 1974: 13–14 and 35–36.

<sup>26</sup> Wang 1996: 16.284; Ware 1966: 264.

<sup>27</sup> LIU Xiang’s authorship of the *Liexian zhuan* is disputed, but there is no evidence to refute it. See Kaltenmark 1953, which includes a complete translation of the text and discusses the issue of authorship in the introduction.

劉向父德治淮南王獄中所得此書，非為師授也。向本不解道術，偶偏見此書，便謂其意盡在紙上，是以作金不成耳 (Wang 1996: 2.21–22; Ware 1966: 50–51; Che 1999: 78).

Instead of receiving oral instructions and retiring on a mountain with his helpers in order to compound the elixir, as the alchemical practice requires, LIU Xiang claimed that he could do it at court, following only a written text, with the support of attendants provided by the Emperor, and with no concern for the preliminary purification practices:

Some [methods] require oral instructions, and those should only be transmitted by a master. In addition, one should enter the depths of a mountain and stay in a pure and unsoiled area, so that the ordinary foolish people would know nothing about it. LIU Xiang, instead, practiced those methods in the Imperial Palace and allowed the courtiers to attend to his pursuits. Without performing the purification practices, and without breaking off the hustle and bustle of the common human pursuits, how could he ever have succeeded?

其中或有須口訣者，皆宜師授。又宜入於深山之中，清潔之地，不欲令凡俗愚人知之。而劉向止宮中作之，使宮人供給其事，必非齋潔者，又不能斷絕人事，使不來往也，如此安可得成哉 (Wang 1996: 16.285–286; Ware 1966: 266).

The lack of oral instructions prevented LIU Xiang from understanding the true purport of the alchemical practice:

If even some of the common and simple herbs cannot be identified, who may be able to understand the mysterious and secret recipes? It does not surprise, therefore, that LIU Xiang did not succeed in making gold. One who obtains the essentials does not need to worry about sagehood and talent in order to put them in practice: even a common person can do it. LIU Xiang certainly was not a fool; his only fault is that he did not receive the oral instructions.

近易之草，或有不知，玄秘之方，孰能悉解？劉向作金不成，無可怪之也。及得其要，則復不煩聖賢大才而後作也，凡人可為耳。劉向豈頑人哉，直坐不得口訣耳 (Wang 1996: 16.288; Ware 1966: 271).

Despite his erudition and his innate understanding of “the utmost of the wondrous,” LIU Xiang thus ultimately failed only because of the lack of instructions from a master. We shall return to this subject in the next section.

## 5 Seeking Immortality

Seeking immortality is undoubtedly the main theme in the *Inner Chapters*. This subject is so important for GE Hong that, in this case, he does not hesitate to denounce not only the “unessential books on Dao” (*buyao zhi daoshu* 不要之道書) that do not treat it, but even the *Daodejing* and especially the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. The *Daodejing*, which does not share several aspects of GE Hong's vision of immortality, “comes from Laozi but only consists of an outline and a brief summary ... reciting it without obtaining the essential methods (*yaodao* 要道) would be nothing but a wasted effort.” Concerning the *Zhuangzi*, GE Hong disapproves its judgment that

life and death are equivalent: this view is “a myriad miles remote from the divine immortals.”<sup>28</sup>

Just like the Confucian sages, the Daoist immortals as presented by GE Hong are in the first place ordinary human beings, except that they “they do not die as ordinary people do 不與凡人皆死.”<sup>29</sup> When his interlocutor asks whether one should believe that the immortals are truly free from death, GE Hong replies that the metamorphosis from human to immortal is not different from the uncommon instances of transformation that are mentioned in the *Liji* 禮記 (Record of Rites) and other works by literati:

If you say that all beings that receive breath have a fixed form, then what about the pheasant that becomes an oyster, the sparrow that becomes a clam, the earthworm that grows wings, the frog that rises in flight, the oyster that becomes a dragonfly, the lentil that becomes a centipede, the field mouse that becomes a lark, the rotten grass that becomes a glowworm, the crocodile that becomes a tiger, and the snake that becomes a dragon? Would all this be not true? And if you say that, unlike ordinary creatures, humans receive an invariable nature, and that when the August Heaven bestows life there is no change from one thing to another, then what about NIU Ai who became a tiger, the old woman of Chu who became a turtle, ZHI Li who became a willow, the woman of Qin who became a stone, the dead ones who return to life, males and females who change their bodily forms, the longevity of Old Peng, and the early death of those who pass away in their youth? What would the reason be? If differences do occur, then what limit could one set to them?<sup>30</sup>

若謂受氣皆有一定，則雉之為蜃，雀之為蛤，壤蟲假翼，川蛙翻飛，水蠅為蛉，苕苓為蛆，田鼠為鴽，腐草為螢，鼃之為虎，蛇之為龍，皆不然乎。若謂人稟正性，不同凡物，皇天賦命，無有彼此，則牛哀成虎，楚媼為鼃，枝離為柳，秦女為石，死而更生，男女易形，老彭之壽，殤子之夭，其何故哉？苟有不同，則其異有何限乎 (Wang 1996: 2.14; Ware 1966: 37; Che 1999: 64–65).

GE Hong's argument here is identical to his rationale for the refinement of natural substances into an alchemical elixir: in that case as well, the transmutation is not different from uncommon but nevertheless natural processes of change, of which he provides another series of examples.<sup>31</sup> More important, when asked why Confucius and the Duke of Zhou do not mention attaining immortality, GE Hong replies that this transformation can occur even if it is not discussed in the Classics: “There is no limit to what is not mentioned in the five Classics, and there are many things of which the Duke of Zhou and Confucius do not speak 夫五經所不載者無限矣，周孔所不言者不少矣” (Wang 1996: 8.153; Ware 1966: 146; Che 1999: 128). Even an expert in the *Classic of Changes* would be unable to explain certain events, and this is even more true of the uncommon phenomena documented in different works: “All

<sup>28</sup> Wang 1996: 8.151; Ware 1966: 141–142; Che 1999: 123–124. GE Hong also includes the *Wenzi* 文子 and the *Guanyinzi* 關尹子 among the texts he criticizes for the same reason.

<sup>29</sup> Wang 1996: 2.14; Ware 1966: 37; Che 1999: 65.

<sup>30</sup> In their translations, both James Ware and Philippe Che provide references to the sources of most of these statements. For similar passages, see Wang 1996: 3.46 (“there are more than 900 instances of transformations”); Ware 1966: 54; Che 1999: 81, and Wang 1996: 3.52; Ware 1966: 65; Che 1999: 92. On the relation between the acquirement of immortality and transformations that occur in nature, see Lai 1998: 200–201.

<sup>31</sup> Wang 1996: 16.284; Ware 1966: 262–263.

of these extraordinary phenomena are counted by the thousands. Can we still say that what is not mentioned in the five Classics and what is not expounded by the Duke of Zhou and Confucius does not exist? 凡此奇事，蓋以千計，五經所不載，周孔所不說，可皆復云無是物乎” (Wang 1996: 8.153–155; Ware 1966: 146–150; Che 1999: 128–131).<sup>32</sup>

One question inevitably arises regarding the view of immortality in the *Inner Chapters*: does GE Hong understand immortality as the unending subsistence of one's physical body? To answer this question, we should first consider that “longevity” is different from “immortality”: the reach of longevity is indefinite rather than unlimited. Yet, GE Hong's views remain somewhat ambiguous, especially because he discusses this subject through his own statements, through statements probably (in some cases, explicitly) drawn from other sources, and also through plain hagiographic narratives. For this reason, we may read in one of the *Inner Chapters* that the transformation from ordinary human to immortal does not involve a change of bodily features: the immortals “have everlasting presence and do not die, but the bodies that they have long had undergo no change (*jiushen bu gai* 舊身不改).”<sup>33</sup> In another chapter, where GE Hong reports the words of his master, we read instead:

Those who, in ancient times, attained immortality would sometimes grow wings and feathers and would transform themselves into flying creatures. Having lost the fundamental human features, they acquired a different bodily form.

古之得仙者，或身生羽翼，變化飛行，失人之本，更受異形 (Wang 1996: 3.52; Ware 65; Che 1999: 92).

Similarly, in a passage that will be quoted below we read that the highest category of immortals “raise their bodies (*juxing* 舉形) and ascend to Emptiness.” These words, however, are quoted from an anonymous source, and the only two other occurrences of the expression “raising one's body” in the *Inner Chapters* are found in another quotation from a different source and in the title of a now-lost text.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these and other conflicting statements and unclear points, one detail is significant to answer the question asked above. According to GE Hong, there is an important difference between those who live in our world and seek immortality, on the one hand, and those who have already attained immortality and temporarily live in our world, on the other. Concerning the latter category of immortals, he writes:

In case they are in a playful mood and pass among men, they hide their true nature and conceal their differences. Externally, they are the same as ordinary people: one may be close to them or one step ahead of or behind them, but who could be aware of them? If they had squared eyes like JIAO Jian or ears rising from the top of their heads like QIONG Shu, if they rode a dragon like MA Huang or drove a white crane like Prince Jin, if they had a scaled

<sup>32</sup>Here GE Hong gives about five dozen examples, most of which are drawn from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing* 山海經) and the *Record of Diverse Things* (*Bowu Zhi* 博物志). In another passage, GE Hong writes: “What limit can there be to the amazing things that exist in the boundless space between heaven and earth?” See Wang 1996: 2.14; Ware 1966: 38; Che 1999: 65.

<sup>33</sup>Wang 1996: 2.14; Ware 1966: 37; Che 1999: 65.

<sup>34</sup>Wang 1996: 5.115; Ware 1966: 108; Che 1999: 106. See also Wang 1996: 19.334 which cites the *Book of Completing the Way by Raising One's Body* (*Juxing Daocheng Jing* 舉形道成經).

or snake-like body, a golden chariot, or clothes made of feathers, one could recognize them. Without a profound vision, how could one behold their bodies? Without a penetrating hearing, how could one hear their voices?<sup>35</sup>

假令游戲，或經人間，匿真隱異，外同凡庸，比肩接武，孰有能覺乎？若使皆如郊閒兩瞳之正方，邛疏之雙耳，出乎頭巔。馬皇乘龍而行，子晉躬禦白鶴。或鱗身蛇軀，或金車羽服，乃可得知耳。自不若斯，則非洞視者安能觀其形，非徹聽者安能聞其聲哉 (Wang 1996: 2.15; Ware 1966: 39; Che 1999: 66).

According to this passage, when the immortals spend time in our world, they conceal their true nature and cannot be recognized by ordinary people. This suggests that immortality, for GE Hong, is not “physical” in a literal sense. The immortals who live in our world are born in it as any ordinary person and are bound to depart from it through death. This, however, is only a transient state: after death, they return to their domain.

The case of the seekers of immortality is different. As we have seen, one becomes an immortal by virtue of the destiny received at the time of conception. That destiny should be fulfilled through the performance of suitable practices, which can only be taught by a master. Whether meeting a master is also part of one’s destiny, or depends on one’s resolution to fulfill one’s destiny, is a question that GE Hong does not approach directly. In a passage of his work, however, he states that such encounter would “definitely” or “necessarily” (*bi* 必) occur to those who are fated to become immortals:

According to the books of the Immortals, all those who attain immortality happen by destiny to be in conjunction with the breath of divine immortality; this is their natural endowment. Therefore, when they are still in the womb, they already harbor by nature their faith in the Dao. When they acquire discernment, they devote themselves to that pursuit, and they will definitely meet a bright master and receive the relevant methods. Otherwise, they will not have faith in it and will not seek, and even if they seek, they will not find it.<sup>36</sup>

按仙經以為諸得仙者，皆其受命偶值神仙之氣，自然所稟。故胞胎之中，已含信道之性，及其有識，則心好其事，必遭明師而得其法，不然，則不信不求，求亦不得也 (Wang 1996: 12.226; Ware 1966: 203; Che 1999: 160).

Study under a master is necessary because, while one may be destined from conception to become an immortal, the actual attainment of that state is a process that requires instructions and practices. For this reason, when his interlocutor remarks that the longevity of persons like Pengzu is an entirely “natural” (*ziran* 自然) phenomenon, and not something “attainable through study” (*ke xuede* 可學得), GE Hong strongly disagrees:

Concerning Old Peng, we are still dealing with a mere man; his unique longevity did not derive from belonging to a different species, but from having attained the Dao: it was not

<sup>35</sup> QIONG Shu, MA Huang (Mashi Huang 馬師皇), and Prince Jin (WANGZI Qiao 王子喬) have biographies in the *Lixian zhuan*; see Kaltenmark 1953: 84–85, 47–48, and 109–114, respectively. The reason why the realized persons (*zhenren* 真人) hide themselves, adds GE Hong, is that they are unable to bear those do not recognize them as such.

<sup>36</sup> The main subject of chapters 14 and 20 is the requirement of finding a master and the need to distinguish between true realized beings and practitioners of limited knowledge.

“natural” ... If you say that they (i.e., those like Old Peng) are all specially endowed with a different breath, their stories all speak of learning from masters and of ingesting [medicines]. It is not innate knowledge.

至於彭老猶是人耳，非異類而壽獨長者，由於得道，非自然也……若謂彼皆特稟異氣，然其相傳皆有師奉服食，非生知也 (Wang 1996: 3.46; Ware 1966: 53–54; Che 1999: 80–81).

Asked again whether anyone in antiquity attained longevity without doing anything about it, GE Hong replies:

No. Some of them followed a bright master, worked hard and practiced diligently, and then were presented with a medicine already compounded. Others received a secret method, and compounded it by themselves.

無也。或隨明師，積功累勤，便得賜以合成之藥。或受秘方，自行治作 (Wang 1996: 13.240–241; Ware 1966: 215).<sup>37</sup>

Since immortality depends on destiny, the masters transmit the methods only to those who they recognize as bound to become immortals:

The Daoists treasure and keep secret the arts of immortality. Among their disciples, they select the very best ones and transmit the essential instructions to them only after a long time of perfecting. As for the worldly people, who are contented with not having faith and not seeking, why should they make an effort to talk to them about those matters?<sup>38</sup>

夫道家寶秘仙術，弟子之中，尤尚簡擇，至精彌久，然後告之以要訣，況於世人，幸自不信不求，何為當強以語之邪 (Wang 1996: 12.226; Ware 1966: 204–205; Che 1999: 161).

The foot of Mount Taihua 太華, adds GE Hong, are littered with the bones of those who tried to “enter the mountain” (*rushan* 入山) without knowing the proper methods, which only the masters can teach (Wang 1996: 17.299; Ware 1966: 279).

In the *Inner Chapters*, GE Hong briefly describes a threefold categorization of immortals, which became one of the models for discussions of this subject in later Daoism:

A book of the Immortals says: “Superior persons raise their bodies and ascend to Emptiness; they are called celestial immortals. Median persons roam among illustrious mountains; they are called earthly immortals. Inferior persons first die and then slough off [their corpses]; they are called immortals released from their mortal bodies.” Now, [Li] Shaojun is certainly one who obtained release from his mortal body.

按仙經云，上士舉形昇虛，謂之天仙。中士游於名山，謂之地仙。下士先死後蛻，謂之屍解仙。今少君必屍解者也 (Wang 1996: 2.20; Ware 1966: 47; Che 1999: 75).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> On this subject see Lai 1998: 202 and Puett 2007: 99–101.

<sup>38</sup> As we shall see in a passage quoted below, concerned with a corpus of Daoist texts, “the immortal officers and the accomplished men of antiquity ... transmitted them only to those destined to become immortals.”

<sup>39</sup> GE Hong gives a list of the mountains inhabited by the earthly immortals in 4.85 (Ware 1966: 93–94). On this classification of the immortals in the *Inner Chapters* see Lai 1998: 204–207. On its background and its multiple developments in later Daoism, see Lee 1996.

While GE Hong refers to “release from the mortal body” (*shijie* 屍解) only once again in the *Inner Chapters*, the two other degrees of immortality are mentioned more frequently, especially with regard to the benefits of the ingestion of elixirs or other substances.<sup>40</sup> Despite its importance, however, this is not GE Hong’s main theoretical foundation of his discourse on immortality. GE Hong’s quotation from the anonymous “book of the Immortals” only serves to support his view that LI Shaojun 李少君 (who is associated with the first mention of an alchemical method in China) was an adept of a lower rank; and this, in turn, is part of a lengthy discussion where GE Hong suggests that rulers should not allow practitioners who vainly promise immortality to surround them, but should instead look for a “bright master” (*mingshi* 明師).<sup>41</sup> Moreover, as we shall presently see, GE Hong’s own definition of an “earthly immortal” is different from the one given in passage.

What is more important for the GE Hong is a different subdivision of practitioners. Quoting again an unidentified source, he writes:

Someone says: “Superior persons attain the Dao in an army; median persons attain the Dao in a city; inferior persons attain the Dao in the mountain forests.” All of them have already formed the medicines of immortality, but they do not yet wish to ascend to heaven. They may be in an army but cannot be harmed by sharp blades, and they may be in a city but cannot be affected by human misfortunes. The inferior persons, instead, have not yet attained this and thus stay in a mountain forest.<sup>42</sup>

或云：上士得道於三軍，中士得道於都市，下士得道於山林，此皆為仙藥已成，未欲昇天，雖在三軍，而鋒刃不能傷，雖在都市，而人禍不能加，而下士未及於此，故止山林耳 (Wang 1996: 10.187; Ware 1966: 171–172; Che 1999: 152).

This threefold categorization is more significant for GE Hong than the distinction into celestial immortals, earthly immortals, and immortals “released from the mortal body.” As LAI Chi-tim has pointed out, GE Hong gives does not give prominence to the immortals who “ascend to heaven,” even though this is the highest form of immortality, but to those who opt for staying in the world.<sup>43</sup> Having said, as we have seen, that the ancient immortals “would sometimes grow wings and feathers and would transform themselves into flying creatures,” he adds that “this is not the human way” (*fei rendao* 非人道), and continues by saying:

The human way is to eat flavory foods, wear light and warm clothes, conjoin Yin and Yang, and hold official rank; to be keen and sharp of sight and hearing, strong and solid of bones and joints, and pleasant and joyous of countenance; and to grow old without declining, extend the length of life, and stay or go as one likes. Being unaffected by cold, heat, wind,

<sup>40</sup>For “release from the mortal body,” see Wang 1996: 9.174; Ware 1966: 159. Several references to the celestial and the earthly immortals are found in chapters 4 and 11. On “release from the mortal body/corpse,” see Robinet 1979 and Cedzich 2001.

<sup>41</sup>Wang 1996: 2.17; Ware 1966: 42; Che 1999: 70. On LI Shaojun (fl. ca. 130 BCE) see Needham et al. 1974: 29–33.

<sup>42</sup>On “superior,” “median,” and “inferior” practitioners, see also Wang 1996: 4.76; Ware 1966: 80; and Wang 1996: 16.287; Ware 1966: 269. Like the previous one, these passages too derive from other sources.

<sup>43</sup>Lai 1998: 207 ff.

and dampness, being unharmed by demons and spirits, being immune from weapons and poisons, and being uninvolved in joys or worries, praise or blame: this is honorable. Turning one's back to one's wife and children, living a solitary life among mountains and marshes, being detached and breaking off from human principles, being solitary in the company of trees and rocks: this is not to be praised.

人道當食甘旨 服輕暖，通陰陽，處官秩，耳目聰明，骨節堅強，顏色悅懌，老而不衰，延年久視，出處任意，寒溫風濕不能傷，鬼神衆精不能犯，五兵百毒不能中，憂喜毀譽不為累，乃為貴耳。若委棄妻子，獨處山澤，邈然斷絕人理，塊然與木石為鄰，不足多也 (Wang 1996: 3.52–53; Ware 1966: 65; Che 1999: 92).

It is for this reason, says GE Hong, that some immortals postpone their ascension to heaven by ingesting only half a dose of the elixirs they have compounded. He continues:

To be plain, those who seek a long life just cherish the objects of their present desires. Fundamentally, they are not anxious to ascend to emptiness and do not think that rising in flight is superior to staying on the earth. If, by a fortunate chance, they can stay at home and be free from death, why should they seek to rise rapidly to heaven?

篤而論之，求長生者，正惜今日之所欲耳，本不汲汲於昇虛，以飛騰為勝於地上也。若幸可止家而不死者，亦何必求於速登天乎 (Wang 1996: 3.53; Ware 1966: 66; Che 1999: 92).

“Superior persons” (*shangshi* 上士), adds GE Hong, do not wish to leave the world and have no hurry to ascend to heaven. Like Laozi and Pengzu did before them, they rather prefer to “be earthly immortals for a time among other humans.”<sup>44</sup>

## 6 Ethics and Self-Cultivation

In another dialogue, the interlocutor asks GE Hong whether those who practice the Way should first acquire merit. GE Hong replies that not only this is true, but acquiring merit is the main means of preserving the original endowment with which each individual is provided. He explains this principle by again resorting to the authority of the *Yuqianjing* 玉鈐經:

The second part of the *Yuqianjing* says: Establishing merit is most important, and removing one's faults comes next. For those who practice the Way, saving people from dangers so that they can avoid disasters, protecting them from illness and making sure that they do not die an unjust death: these are the highest merits.

按玉鈐經中篇云，立功為上，除過次之。為道者以救人危使免禍，護人疾病，令不枉死，為上功也 (Wang 1996: 3.53; Ware 1966: 66; Che 1999: 93).

A virtuous conduct is as necessary to attain immortality as the performance of self-cultivation practices. One's behavior, in particular, should comply with essential ethical principles, not in the least different from those endorsed by Confucianism. Failure to do so results in the shortening of one's life span, and eventually in early death. GE Hong's quotation of the *Yuqianjing* continues as follows:

<sup>44</sup>Wang 1996: 14.254; Ware 1966: 230.

Those who seek immortality should take loyalty, filial piety, harmony, compliance, benevolence, and trustworthiness as the fundament. If they do not cultivate a virtuous conduct and only engage themselves in the practices, they will not attain a long life. If one performs a major bad action, the Administrator of Destinies will detract one period, and for a minor wrong, he will detract one count [from their life spans]. The detraction depends on the seriousness of the violation.

欲求仙者，要當以忠孝和順仁信為本。若德行不修，而但務方術，皆不得長生也。行惡事大者，司命奪紀，小過奪算，隨所犯輕重，故所奪有多少也 (Wang 1996: 3.53; Ware 1966: 66; Che 1999: 93).

The system of “counting destiny” (*suanming* 算命) alluded to in this passage is quite simple. At least in part, it is once again dependent on one’s natal destiny. At conception, everyone receives a “personal cipher” (*benshu* 本數), which differs for each individual and determines his or her length of life. Detractions from this endowment are quantified on the basis of two units, called the “period” (*ji* 紀) and the “count” (*suan* 算):

The destiny and life span that everyone receives depends on the personal cipher. If the cipher is large, then periods and counts will hardly exhaust it and one will die at an old age. If it is small and one commits many violations, then periods and counts will quickly exhaust it and one will die at an early age.

凡人之受命得壽，自有本數，數本多者，則紀算難盡而遲死，若所稟本少，而所犯者多，則紀算速盡而早死 (Wang 1996: 3.53; Ware 1966: 66; Che 1999: 93).

The precise amount of life-time detracted by the Administrator of Destinies (Siming 司命) depends on the seriousness of the fault. For major or minor faults, one “period” or one “count,” respectively, are subtracted from one’s life span, corresponding to 300 days or 3 days.<sup>45</sup> The detraction occurs when the God of the Hearth (*Caoshen* 竈神) and the Three Corpses (*sanshi* 三尸) ascend to heaven, the former every thirty and the latter every sixty days, and report one’s misdeeds to the Administrator of Destinies. GE Hong describes the Three Corpses as something “not provided with form, but having actuality” (*wuxing er shi* 無形而實), analogous to “the *hun*-souls and the spirits” (*hunling guishen* 魂靈鬼神). He adds that while he is unable to judge whether all of this is true, “the Way of heaven is distant and remote, and the spirits (*guishen*) are difficult to understand.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Wang 1996: 6.125; Ware 1966: 115. In an editorial note, WANG Ming provides good reasons to assume that “3 days” is an error for “100 days” (Wang 1996: 6.132n28).

<sup>46</sup> Wang 1996: 6.125; Ware 1966: 115. On “counting destiny” in the *Inner Chapters* see Lai 1998: 92–94. In the passages quoted above, GE Hong describes the shortening of life span as exclusively due to moral faults and bad deeds, without following the earlier view of the “inherited burden” (*chengfu* 承負) expounded in the *Classic of Great Peace* (*Taipingjing* 太平經). However, he briefly mentions a similar view in his discussion of the “personal cipher,” where he says: “If someone commits suicide before their counts and periods are finished, the calamities will reach their sons and grandsons. Everyone who abuses or takes away by force someone else’s goods will cause his wife, children, and household to be included in the deduction. They will also encounter death, but this will not occur immediately.” Wang 1996: 6.126; Ware 1966: 115. On the “inherited burden” see Hendrischke 1991 and Maeda 2006 (where this passage is discussed on page 108).

The emphasis placed on the requirement of ethical conduct and virtuous behavior for attaining immortality can be read as yet another attempt to make the concept of “seeking immortality” acceptable to GE Hong’s Confucian readers. At the same time, the system he describes is also an elementary and early example of the Daoist concept of “changing destiny.”<sup>47</sup> Here, however, lies what appears to be another unclear point in GE Hong’s thought. How could one change one’s destiny—or at least take control of it, avoiding that one’s life span is decreased—if one’s existence is determined by the star under which one is born? GE Hong does not provide clues to answer this question, which becomes important when we consider that one’s good deeds may also determine a higher or lower rank in the hierarchies of the immortals:

[The *Yuqianjing*] also says: Those wishing to become earthly immortals should establish 300 good deeds. Those wishing to become celestial immortals should establish 1,200 good deeds. If, after performing 1,199 good deeds, one negligently commits a single bad deed, all the good ones previously performed are lost and one must begin anew.<sup>48</sup>

又云，人欲地仙，當立三百善；欲天仙，立千二百善。若有千一百九十九善，而忽復中行一惡，則盡失前善，乃當復更起善數耳 (Wang 1996: 3.53; Ware 1966: 66–67; Che 1999: 93).

The contradiction, in fact, may not be owed to GE Hong himself, but to his source, the *Yuqianjing*, which continues as follows:

If the accumulation of good deeds is not complete, one can ingest the medicines of immortality but this will be of no advantage. If one does not ingest the medicines of immortality but performs good actions, one will not attain immortality but will be able to avoid the calamity of a sudden death.

又云，積善事未滿，雖服仙藥，亦無益也。若不服仙藥，並行好事，雖未便得仙，亦可無卒死之禍矣 (Wang 1996: 3.53–54; Ware 1966: 67; Che 1999: 94).

This passage appears to be at odds with the one discussed earlier (“a man’s good and bad fortunes take form on the day the embryo is formed”). Be that as it may, GE Hong does not elaborate further, but concludes with an interesting remark: it was probably because Pengzu 彭祖 did not acquire enough merit that he was unable to ascend to heaven and was instead bound to live eight or nine centuries as an earthly immortal.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See Kohn 1998, and for the adoption of the *suanming* system in an early *Tianshi dao* 天師道 text, Kleeman 2016: 148–155.

<sup>48</sup> On this passage, see Kohn 1998: 863–864.

<sup>49</sup> Wang 1996: 3.54; Ware 1966: 67; Che 1999: 94. GE Hong also reports a different reason—Pengzu preferred to stay on earth because too many immortals were competing for the higher positions in heaven—but appears to prefer his own explanation. See Wang 1996: 3.52; Ware 1966: 65; Che 1999: 91.

## 7 A Miscellany of Practices

In addition to the primary ethical requirements, GE Hong repeatedly mentions different practices that he defines as the “foundation” (*ben* 本) or the “essential” (*yao* 要) of self-cultivation. The “medicines” (*yao* 藥, by which he means the alchemical elixirs) are, in his view, the foundation of longevity and immortality, but one may obtain faster results when the circulation of breath (*xingqi* 行氣) is also practiced. If the “medicines” are beyond reach, one can attain a long life by practicing breathing methods, providing that one understands their principles; through them, one can also heal illnesses and gain protection from calamities and demonic entities. In addition, one should know the sexual practices in order to preserve one’s essence (*jing* 精).<sup>50</sup> An analogous list of methods is found in another discussion, where GE Hong intends to demonstrate that self-cultivation does not necessarily demand withdrawal from the world:

If one wishes to seek divine immortality, it is sufficient to acquire the essential. The essential lies in treasuring one’s essence, circulating breath, and ingesting the great medicines: this is sufficient, and one does not need more than that.<sup>51</sup>

欲求神仙，唯當得其至要，至要者在於寶精行炁，服一大藥便足，亦不用多也 (Wang 1996: 8.149; Ware 1966: 138; Che 1999: 120).

In a further conversation, GE Hong is asked why some persons know nothing about the esoteric arts and yet live a long life. He replies that those people either have hidden virtues, or are destined to live long, or simply “escape by fortunate chance (*xing er ou'er* 幸而偶爾) misfortune and accidents,” like birds and animals that are spared by a hunting party or plants and trees that survive a major fire. This time he continues with a different list of “essentials”:

In order to protect oneself and avert harms, the essential lies in abiding by the protections and interdictions (*fangjin* 防禁) to preserve one’s bodily form, and in carrying upon oneself talismans and swords inscribed with celestial writings. Ceremonies and prayers are useless: one should rely on one’s own invulnerability and not on the leniency of the spirits. Even though meditating on the Mystery (*xuan* 玄) and holding the One, or maintaining the [divine] effulgences and embracing them in one’s person can ward off evil and clear the inauspicious, they cannot prolong one’s life or eliminate the body’s illnesses.<sup>52</sup>

要於防身卻害，當修守形之防禁，佩天文之符劍耳。祭禱之事無益也，當恃我之不可侵也，無恃鬼神之不侵我也。然思玄執一，含景環身，可以辟邪惡，度不祥，而不能延壽命，消體疾也 (Wang 1996: 9.176–177; Ware 1966: 164; Che 1999: 144–145).

One may easily be puzzled by these contrasting enumerations of “essentials” and even more so by the bewildering variety of methods, techniques, and

<sup>50</sup>Wang 1996: 5.114; Ware 1966: 105; Che 1999: 102–103. This is followed by examples of the medical and apotropaic virtues of breath (*qi*).

<sup>51</sup>This passage too is followed by a description of the features and benefits of breathing and sexual practices.

<sup>52</sup>The “effulgences” (*jing* 景) are the inner deities.

practices—physical, meditational, alchemical, and ritual—that GE Hong mentions or describes in his *Inner Chapters*. Some chapters are entirely or mostly devoted to particular subjects, such as alchemy (chapters 4 and 16), “immortality drugs” (*xian-yao* 仙藥, chapter 11), and meditation (chapter 18). Two other chapters (5 and 17) are veritable patchworks of assorted methods. A tentative classification of these techniques, which is far from exhausting the whole repertoire, might include the following:

1. Physiological practices, including different breathing methods (among them, the use of breath to cast apotropaic and therapeutic spells); *daoyin* 導引; abstention from cereals (*bigu* 辟穀) and other dietary regimes; and sexual practices.<sup>53</sup>
2. Talismans (*fu* 符), seals (*yin* 印), spells (*zhu* 祝), and the use of mirrors to summon deities and detect demons.<sup>54</sup>
3. Methods for “invisibility,” including several instances of the *dunjia* 遁甲 (Hidden Stem) method.<sup>55</sup>
4. The ritual pace known as “steps of Yu” (*Yu bu* 禹步), used as part of the *dunjia* practices and for collecting the *zhi* 芝 plants of immortality.<sup>56</sup>
5. Methods for avoiding cold and heat, for “soaring up in flight” (*chengqiao* 乘蹻), and for walking on the water or staying under water.<sup>57</sup>
6. Meditation practices for “visionary divination.”<sup>58</sup>

It is worthwhile to remind that none of these methods is GE Hong's own creation. Some of them, he says, were transmitted to him by his master.<sup>59</sup> Concerning others he states that they derive from notes taken from earlier works; this is the case, in particular, of the remarkable collection of methods for “invisibility” and of one of

<sup>53</sup>On breathing, see Wang 1996: 5.114–115; Ware 1966: 105–107; Che 1999: 103–105, and Wang 1996: 8.149–150; Ware 1966: 138–139; Che 1999: 120–122. Concerning the first passage, see the remarks in Harper 1998: 175–177. *Daoyin* is often mentioned in passing, e.g., Wang 1996: 15.274; Ware 1966: 257, where this practice is suggested as a therapy for hearing disorders. The *daoyin* practices mentioned by GE Hong always consist in imitating movements of animals; on these and related techniques, see Despeux 1989. On diets, see Wang 1996: 15.266–269; Ware 1966: 243–249. On sexual practices, see Wang 1996: 8.150; Ware 1966: 140–141; Che 1999: 122–123.

<sup>54</sup>On talismans and seals, see Wang 1996: 17.308–312; Ware 1966: 295–297, and the list of talismans in Wang 1996: 19.335–336; Ware 1966: 313 and 384–385. Spells are found, e.g., in Wang 1996: 17.303; Ware 1966: 287, Wang 1996: 17.307; Ware 1966: 294, and Wang 1996: 17.313; Ware 1966: 299–300. On mirrors, see Wang 1996: 15.273–274; Ware 1966: 253–254 (for summoning deities), and Wang 1996: 17.300; Ware 1966: 281–282 (for detecting demons).

<sup>55</sup>Wang 1996: 15.270–271; Ware 1966: 251, and Wang 1996: 17.301–302; Ware 1966: 284–286.

<sup>56</sup>Wang 1996: 11.209; Ware 1966: 198, and Wang 1996: 17.302–303; Ware 1966: 286.

<sup>57</sup>Wang 1996: 15.269; Ware 1966: 249, Wang 1996: 15.275; Ware 1966: 258–259, and Wang 1996: 17.312; Ware 1966: 297, respectively.

<sup>58</sup>Wang 1996: 15.272–274; Ware 1966: 254–257. On these and analogous methods described in later Daoist sources, see Andersen 1994.

<sup>59</sup>Wang 1996: 8.150; Ware 1966: 140–141; Che 1999: 122–123, and Wang 1996: 17.301; Ware 1966: 282.

the sets of alchemical recipes.<sup>60</sup> In addition, a large number of methods are certainly copied or summarized from texts that GE Hong, unfortunately, quotes in most cases without precise attribution.

Also important is the fact is that GE Hong does not equally endorse all these methods. In fact, he is critical or skeptical about the proclaimed virtues of some of them, and refrains from judging certain others. On the abstention from cereals he says:

The books on the Dao ... [say that] those who ingest cereals may be wise but are not longevous, while those who ingest breath obtain spirit illumination and do not die. This is only a biased discourse of the schools of the “circulation of breath.”

道書 ..... 食穀者智而不壽，食氣者神明不死。此乃行氣者一家之偏說耳 (Wang 1996: 15.266; Ware 1966: 244).

He also rejects the claim that sexual practices grant mundane benefits, such as “rising high in office” and “doubling profits in business”:

This is all erroneous talk found in the writings of spirit mediums and the fantasies of wicked people; it derives from the embellishments of dabblers and entirely belies the facts.

此皆巫書妖妄過差之言，由於好事增加潤色，至令失實 (Wang 1996: 6.128–129; Ware 1966: 122).

On invisibility he says:

There are five divine methods [for this], including one for “sitting and then rising up and disappear.” However, they are of no benefit for longevity.

神道有五，坐在立亡其數焉。然無益於年命之事 (Wang 1996: 15.270; Ware 1966: 251).

As we have seen, GE Hong also leaves open the question of whether the methods for “counting destiny” are entirely reliable. Similarly, on the hemerologic calculations for “entering the mountain” he writes:

The conditions of heaven and earth, the good and bad luck depending on Yin and Yang, are so limitless that one can hardly examine them in detail. I do not say with certainty that these things exist, but I dare not maintain that they do not exist.

天地之情狀，陰陽之吉凶，茫茫乎其亦難詳也，吾亦不必謂之有，又亦不敢保其無也 (Wang 1996: 17.301; Ware 1966: 283–284).

As we shall see in the next sections, when GE Hong’s statements about the methods he describes are read in relation to one another, his views become clearer. In light of what we have seen above, moreover, it becomes apparent that, in writing these portions of the *Inner Chapters*, GE Hong intends to provide his fellow literati with an overview of the self-cultivation practices of this time, pointing out the respective virtues in connection with his main subject: the search of immortality.

<sup>60</sup> See Wang 1996: 17.302; Ware 1966: 284, and Wang 1996: 16.284; Ware 1966: 262, respectively.

## 8 The Minor Arts

Despite the lack of a clear structure in his work, GE Hong draws an invaluable picture of the southeastern traditions of his time.<sup>61</sup> At the lower end of those traditions, GE Hong places a broad group of practitioners whom he calls “coarse and rustic” (*zawei* 雜猥). GE Hong associates them with the “minor arts” (*xiaoshu* 小術), which in his view include healing methods, longevity techniques, and certain divination practices:

It is clear that if the present-day coarse and rustic practitioners do not obtain the methods of the Golden Elixir, they will not obtain a long life. They may be able to heal illnesses and bring a dead person to life, to abstain from cereals and be free from hunger for several years, to command gods and demons, to be sitting at one moment and then suddenly disappear, to see one thousand miles away, to know the rise and fall of any person, to reveal the disasters concealed in what is obscure and hidden, and to know the fortunes and calamities awaiting what has not yet sprouted. All this, however, will be of no advantage to increase the length of their life.

今雜猥道士之輩，不得金丹大法，必不得長生可知也。雖治病有起死之效，絕穀則積年不飢，役使鬼神，坐在立亡，瞻視千里，知人盛衰，發瀋崇於幽翳，知禍福於未萌，猶無益於年命也 (Wang 1996: 14.259; Ware 1966: 240).

GE Hong deems the “minor arts” inadequate to avoid harms caused by demons and spirits. Herbal drugs, in particular, can only prolong one’s life. Unlike alchemy, meditation, the use of talismans, and the observance of interdictions and precepts, they can help one to heal from “internal ailments” (*neiji* 內疾), but cannot prevent harms caused by malevolent entities:

Those who do not obtain the Golden Elixir, and only ingest medicines of herbs and plants and practice the minor arts, can extend the number of years and defer the time of death, but cannot obtain immortality. Some only know how to ingest herbal medicines, but ignore the essential arts for inverting the course of aging: they entirely lack the principle of long life. Others do not understand how to wear the divine talismans at their belt, how to observe interdictions and precepts, how to meditate on the deities within themselves, and how to guard the True One: they can merely prevent internal ailments from arising and wind and humidity from hurting them. If a noxious demon, a powerful evil entity, a mountain sprite, or a poison in the water suddenly harms them, they are dead. Some do not obtain the methods to enter the mountains and let the mountain deities bring calamities to them. Goblins and demons will put them to test, wild animals will wound them, poisons from pools will hit them, and snakes will bite them. There will be not one, but many prospects of death.

不得金丹，但服草木之藥及修小術者，可以延年遲死耳，不得仙也。或但知服草藥，而不知還年之要術，則終無久生之理也。或不曉帶神符，行禁戒，思身神，守真一，則止可令內疾不起，風濕不犯耳。若卒有惡鬼強邪，山精水毒害之，則便死也。或不得入山之法，令山神為之作禍，則妖鬼試之，猛獸傷之，溪毒擊之，蛇蝮螫之，致多死事，非一條也 (Wang 1996: 13.243; Ware 1966: 219).

<sup>61</sup>This and the next two sections of this essay are based in part on Pregadio 2005, chapter 7 (“Gods, Demons, and Elixir: Alchemy in Fourth-Century Jiangnan”).

At best, says GE Hong, some of the “minor arts” may serve as preliminary to the compounding of elixirs. If they are practiced with the ingestion of the “minor medicines” (*xiaoyao* 小藥), they allow one to live longer. After that, “one can gradually climb to the Subtle” (*jianjie jingwei* 漸階精微).<sup>62</sup>

## 9 Nourishing Life

A similar attitude is apparent in statements concerning the practices of “nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生), which according to GE Hong include, in addition to the ingestion of herbal drugs, breathing, *daoyin*, and sexual techniques. As we have seen, GE Hong’s view of these disciplines is condensed in a question: “Can the Dao really be nothing more than the pursuit of nourishing life?” Accordingly, he qualifies these techniques as inferior or ancillary to the ingestion of elixirs, as they merely grant freedom from illness:

Those who fully understand the principles of nourishing life ingest the divine medicines. In addition, they circulate their breath without negligence, and they practice *daoyin* from morning to evening so that their constructive and defensive [breaths] operate without obstructions. Moreover, they practice the arts of the bedchamber, moderate their food and drinks, do not expose themselves to wind and humidity, and do not grieve about what they cannot do. Thus, they can be without illnesses.<sup>63</sup>

養生之盡理者，既將服神藥，又行氣不懈，朝夕導引，以宣動榮衛，使無輟闕，加之以房中之術，節量飲食，不犯風濕，不患所不能，如此可以不病 (Wang 1996: 15.271; Ware 1966: 252).

The main object of GE Hong’s criticism is the belief that one can practice those techniques as the sole way to attain immortality:

In everything pertaining to nourishing life, one should listen much but incorporate the essential, look wide but choose the best. One cannot rely on one’s bias to a single practice. Moreover, the danger is that those who devote themselves to one of these practices trust only their discipline of choice. Those who know the arts of the Mysterious Woman and the Pure Woman say that one can transcend the world only through the arts of the bedchamber. Those who are expert in “exhaling [the old] and inhaling [the new breath]” say that one can extend the number of years only through the circulation of breath. Those who know the methods for bending and stretching say that one can avoid aging only through *daoyin*. Those who know the methods based on herbs and plants say that one can surpass any limit only through medicines and pills. When the study of the Dao does not bear fruit, it is because of biases like these.

凡養生者，欲令多聞而體要，博見而善擇，偏修一事，不足必賴也。又患好事之徒，各仗其所長，知玄素之術者，則曰唯房中之術，可以度世矣；明吐納之道者，則曰唯行氣可以延年矣；知屈伸之法者，則曰唯導引可以難老矣；知草木之方者，則曰唯藥餌可以無窮矣；學道之不成就，由乎偏枯之若此也 (Wang 1996: 6.124; Ware 1966: 113–114).

<sup>62</sup> Wang 1996: 13.252; Ware 1966: 112.

<sup>63</sup> The “constructive breath” (*yingqi* 榮氣) circulates within the system of the conduits and nourishes the whole body. The “defensive breath” (*weiqi* 衛氣) circulates between the skin and the flesh, and protects from illnesses and other disturbances.

A clear example of GE Hong's views on "nourishing life" is his evaluation of the sexual practices, whose benefits do not exceed those of the "minor arts":

Among the arts of Yin and Yang (i.e., the sexual practices), the best ones can heal the lesser illnesses, and the next ones help one avoid becoming depleted. Since their principles have inherent limits, how could they confer divine immortality, prevent calamities, and bring about happiness?"

夫陰陽之術，高可以治小疾，次可以免虛耗而已。其理自有極，安能致神仙而卻禍致福乎 (Wang 1996: 6.129; Ware 1966: 122).

GE Hong then points out that the Yellow Emperor, who is associated with both alchemy and the sexual techniques, attained immortality through the former and not the latter:

... the common people hear that the Yellow Emperor rose to heaven with 1,200 women, and say that he obtained longevity only thanks to this. They do not know that the Yellow Emperor compounded the Nine Elixirs on Lake Ding at the foot of Mount Jing, and then rose to heaven by riding a dragon. He may have had 1,200 women, but it was not for this reason that he managed to do it.

而俗人聞黃帝以千二百女昇天，便謂黃帝單以此事致長生，而不知黃帝於荆山之下，鼎湖之上，飛九丹成，乃乘龍登天也。黃帝自可有千二百女耳，而非單行之所由也 (Wang 1996: 6.129; Ware 1966: 122–123).

Like the ingestion of herbal drugs, therefore, this and the other techniques of "nourishing life" do afford benefits, but they are not the same as those that only meditation and alchemy can grant.

## 10 Meditation and Alchemy

GE Hong states that the higher religious traditions of Jiangnan were incorporated into three different textual bodies. The first consisted of scriptures based on talismans, mainly represented by the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* (*Sanhuang Wen* 三皇文) and the *Charts of the True Forms of the Five Peaks* (*Wuyue Zhenxing Tu* 五岳真形圖):

I heard my master ZHENG [Yin] say that among the important writings on the Dao none surpasses the *Inner Writ of the Three Sovereigns* and the *Charts of the True Forms of the Five Peaks*. The immortal officers and the accomplished men of antiquity venerated the methods expounded in these writings, considered them to be secret, and transmitted them only to those destined to become immortals. They handed them down only once in forty years, after one made an oath by smearing one's mouth with blood and established a bond by offering gifts [to one's master].

余聞鄭君言，道書之重者，莫過於三皇內文五岳真形圖也。古人仙官至人，尊秘此道，非有仙名者，不可授也。受之四十年一傳，傳之歃血而盟，委質為約 (Wang 1996: 19.336; Ware 1966: 314).

Owning the *Sanhuang Wen*, or merely holding it in one's hands, offered protection against assaults of demons, dangers brought by external forces, and even death.<sup>64</sup> One could also use both texts to summon deities that would appear under a human shape, "and one will be able to question them on good and bad fortune, on safe and dangerous things, and on the detrimental or harmless course of illnesses." These powers derive from the powerful talismans on which the *Three Sovereigns* and the *True Forms* were based.

However, despite their prodigious apotropaic and mantic powers, the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns* and the *Charts of the Five Peaks* do not suffice to grant immortality. That faculty is only possessed by meditation and alchemy, which GE Hong deems to be the highest self-cultivation practices. In his view, alchemy and meditation enable one not only to communicate with the gods and expel the noxious spirits, but also to obtain transcendence. The most important meditation practice is the method of "guarding the One," which consists in visualizing the deity that represent Unity in its multiple residences within the human body.<sup>65</sup> This passage is well known but deserves to be quoted here:

The One has surnames and names, as well as clothes and colors. In men it is nine-tenths of an inch tall, in women six-tenths of an inch. Sometimes it is in the lower Cinnabar Field, two inches and four-tenths below the navel. Sometimes it is in the middle Cinnabar Field, which is the Golden Portal of the Crimson Palace below the heart. Sometimes it is in the space between the eyebrows: one inch behind them is the Hall of Light, two inches is the Cavern Chamber, and three inches is the upper Cinnabar Field. This is deemed to be extremely important within the lineages of the Way. From generation to generation, they orally transmit the surnames and names [of the inner gods] after smearing their mouths with blood.

一有姓字服色，男長九分，女長六分，或在臍下二寸四分下丹田中，或在心下絳宮金闕中丹田也，或在人兩眉間，卻行一寸為明堂，二寸為洞房，三寸為上丹田也。此乃是道家所重，世世歃血口傳其姓名耳（Wang 1996: 18.323; Ware 1966: 302).

On the one hand, the practice of "guarding the One" give access to the divine world: "If you guard the One and preserve the true (*cunzhen* 存真), you will be able to communicate with the gods."<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, this practice grants protection against demons and other ominous entities:

When you are in the shrine of a demon, in a mountain forest, in a land infested by a plague, within a tomb, in a marsh inhabited by tigers and wolves, or in the dwelling of snakes, if you guard the One without distraction all evils will be expelled; but if you forget to guard the One even for an instant, the demons will harm you.

若在鬼廟之中，山林之下，大疫之地，冢墓之間，虎狼之藪，蛇蝮之處，守一不怠，衆惡遠避。若忽偶忘守一，而為百鬼所害（Wang 1996: 18.325; Ware 1966: 305).

Alchemical elixirs, instead, are superior to herbal drugs: while the "medicines of herbs and plants" can only heal illnesses and grant a long life, ingesting the elixirs

<sup>64</sup>Wang 1996: 19.336; Ware 1966: 314–315.

<sup>65</sup>Wang 1996: 18.324; Ware 1966: 303.

<sup>66</sup>Wang 1996: 18.324; Ware 1966: 303.

enables an adept to obtain immortality, communicate with the gods, and expel dangerous spirits.

Even the lowest of the minor elixirs is by far superior to the highest among herbs and plants. If any herb or plant is placed on a fire it burns away. Instead, if cinnabar is placed on a fire it produces quicksilver, and after repeated transmutations it reverts to cinnabar. It is by far superior to any herb or plant and thus can make one live long. Only the divine immortals see this principle.

然小丹之下者，猶自遠勝草木之上者也。凡草木燒之即燼，而丹砂燒之成水銀，積變又還成丹砂，其去凡草木亦遠矣。故能令人長生，神仙獨見此理矣 (Wang 1996: 4.72; Ware 1966: 72).

## 11 Conclusion

The description of practices, of which I could provide here only a very cursory account, is probably the most visible feature of the *Inner Chapters*. For this reason, this work “is so often used as an anthology of the religious practices of the day.”<sup>67</sup> Those passages recover the sense that their author gave to them only when they are read in conjunction with what Philippe Che has called “the discursive chapters” of GE Hong’s work: certain exceptional persons are born with the predestination to immortality, but that predestination must be fulfilled, and that is the purpose of the practices.

Beyond this, as I mentioned at the beginning, GE Hong is one of the Six Dynasties literati and thinkers who attempted, in different ways, to broaden the scope of Confucianism. GE Hong is probably unique among them as he, in trying to push the borders of Confucianism to their limit, effectively goes much beyond them. His intention is made clear by two of the passages quoted in this essay. In one of them, GE Hong states: “There is no limit to what is not mentioned in the five Classics, and there are many things of which the Duke of Zhou and Confucius do not speak.” In the other one, he writes: “Can we still say that what is not mentioned in the five Classics and what is not expounded by the Duke of Zhou and Confucius does not exist?” There is also a social aspect in GE Hong’s ideal of immortality, which in this passage, quoted in James Ware’s translation, leads him to utter a bitter condemnation of a government that disregards the principles he was trying to expound:

Methods leading to immortality call for us to extend our love to the very frontiers of the universe and to view others as we do ourselves; but the prince absorbs the weak, attacks the ignorant, capitalizes on disorder, and spreads devastation. He opens new lands and extends frontiers. He destroys man’s shrines. He herds the living and orders them into the valley of death. Their end is as forsaken wraiths in remote lands, bleached bones befouling the fields. On the Five Peaks he stations hosts with bloody blades; from the north gate of the palace hang Ferganese heads. In one instant, those buried alive and the slain captives amounted to

<sup>67</sup> Puett 2007: 96.

tens of thousands. Mounds of corpses pile up to the clouds; bleaching bones, thick as grass, form whole mountains and fill the valleys.<sup>68</sup>

仙法欲溥愛八荒，視人如己，而人君兼弱攻昧，取亂推亡，闢地拓疆，泯人社稷，駟合生人，投之死地，孤魂絕域，暴骸腐野，五嶺有血刃之師，北關懸大宛之首，坑生煞伏，動數十萬，京觀封尸，仰干雲霄，暴骸如莽，彌山填谷 (Wang 1996: 2.18; Ware 1966: 44; Che 1999: 71–72).

Did GE Hong succeed in his purpose? Although his discourse on immortality is “essentially a representation and product of an intellectual attempt sought by a particular class of literati”,<sup>69</sup> Confucian thinkers and literati never fully accepted GE Hong’s views. They did read, edit, and publish his work, but GE Hong was for them only one of the few “Daoist” authors who deserved to be read in order to learn something about what Daoism was in contemporary or ancient times. Within Daoism, GE Hong is certainly acknowledged as a major figure. But as Michael Puett has noted, only a few decades after he completed his *Inner Chapters*, the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) revelations changed the landscape of Daoism with the creation of a corpus of writings said to descend from one of the highest heavens—and not created by human sages or immortals, as GE Hong might have wished. For this and other reasons, as Puett remarks, “although hoping to be recognized as a master forming his own lineage, and lineage more comprehensive than any that had existed before, GE Hong in fact was to have no such legacy.”<sup>70</sup>

We might call GE Hong a Confucian who was deeply interested in Daoism, or a Daoist who could not forget his Confucian roots. Possibly there is a part of truth in both definitions. While GE Hong may have been unsuccessful in his declared purpose, his success lies in the unique work that he has left us.

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<sup>68</sup>For consistency with the rest of this essay, I have replaced Ware’s “geniehood” with “immortality.”

<sup>69</sup>Lai 1998: 211–212.

<sup>70</sup>Puett 2007: 113.

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