

<Chen Yongbo obtained a method for [making] Seven Star Powder and ingested it. Twenty-eight days later he suddenly disappeared. He had a son of eleven years; the son ingested it, and he, too, disappeared on the twenty-eighth day. This method specifies that within thirty days after ingesting [the product] you will automatically attain transcendence and depart.>

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ARSK

Winter 2018-19

Ban Meng was a person of unknown origin. Some say Ban was a woman. She [?] could walk as swiftly as if flying for a whole day at a time and could also sit in midair while conversing with people. She had the ability to enter the ground: when she first began to depart, her legs would sink [into the earth], then she would sink up to her chest, then only her cap would remain visible, and after a while she would be completely gone. By poking her finger in the ground, she could make a well from which one could drink. By blowing on the tiles on people's roofs, she could set them flying into people's homes. Where people had mulberry groves of several thousand trees, Ban could uproot and gather them together, piling them up like a mountain, and then, after they had been in this state for more than ten days, by blowing on them, she could cause each of them to return to its original place and condition. Ban could also take [a block of dry] ink in her mouth, spread out a piece of paper before her, and by chewing on it and spitting, she could form words that would fill up the entire page and that had coherent meaning.

She took liquor and cinnabar. At the age of four hundred she reverted to youth, entered Mount Tiantai, and departed.

Li Yiqi was a native of Shu. He was sighted over several generations and was said to have lived during Han Emperor Wen's reign. <He had no wife or children. If someone needed to travel a long distance quickly, Li Yiqi would give him a talisman and write something in vermilion underneath both arms. With these, the person could travel a thousand *li* and return before a single day was through. Some of these travelers told of lands in the four directions, palaces, and cities the likes of which no one had ever seen; listeners could not understand what they were talking about. Li would model what they described in dirt; it would correspond in all respects to what they had seen, only it was in miniature, and then in a moment it would vanish. Others of these travelers journeyed to places they themselves did not know, and would return only after a year or more had passed. After performing this, Li would beg for food, then distribute whatever he received to the poor.>

In a corner of the city of Chengdu, Li Yiqi made an earthen den, inside of which he lived. Winter or summer, he always wore only a single-layered gown. When his hair grew long, he would cut it and dispose of it; he let it grow out only about five *zun*. He drank liquor and ate dried meats, jujubes, and chestnuts. Sometimes he would go one hundred or two hundred days without emerging from his den, and during these times there was nothing inside it for him to eat.

When Liu Bei wanted to attack Wu, he sent someone to invite Li Yiqi [to his court]. When Li arrived, Liu Bei treated him with utmost courtesy and respect, and he asked him about the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness [of his plan]. Li made no reply but asked for paper and brush. He filled several dozen sheets with drawings of troops, horses, and weapons, then ripped up and destroyed each with his hands. Then he drew a great man, dug a hole in the ground, and buried the paper in the hole; afterward, he abruptly departed. The ruler was much displeased, but on his own initiative he sent his army to attack Wu. The army suffered a great defeat and retreated. In anger and shame, Liu Bei developed an illness and died. Only now was the meaning [of Li's actions] clear to all: his drawing and burying of a great man was meant to convey that Liu Bei would die.

Li Yiqi seldom spoke. If someone asked him something, he would make no reply. But when people of Shu had troubles, they would go to him and ask him to speak about the inauspiciousness or auspiciousness of their situations, and then wait. They could divine simply from his facial expression whether it would be sad or happy.

Later he entered Langye Mountain and never emerged.

The wife of Cheng Wei, who was a Gate Guardsman under the Han, could communicate with spirits and perform transformations.

Once Cheng Wei was out on a mission and lacked clothing appropriate for the season. This troubled him greatly. Without prompting, his wife brought two items of clothing out to him.

Cheng Wei was fond of alchemical pursuits, but he repeatedly failed to complete [an elixir]. So his wife produced a bit of medicine from a pouch, which she added to the “liquid silver” mixture that was to be heated. Soon it formed silver.

Cheng Wei wanted to receive methods from her, but he never succeeded in doing so; she said that, according to his bones and physiognomy, he ought not to receive them. He relentlessly pressured her, so she “died,” escaped by means of a simulated corpse, and departed.

Lady Fan was the wife of Liu Gang. They both practiced arts of the Dao, and each of them claimed superiority over the other.

In the central courtyard of their home there were two large peach trees. The husband and wife each said an incantation on one of them, and the trees began to struggle with each other, until the tree that Liu Gang had incanted over fled across the fence.

Liu Gang exhaled over a basin of water, and a carp was formed. Lady Fan exhaled over the same basin of water, and an otter was formed, which ate the carp.

Liu Gang was out traveling when he encountered a tiger. [At first] it did not dare rise up, but then it attempted to seize and devour him. Lady Fan seized the tiger and pressed its face to the ground, so that it [could] not look at her. She bound it with twine and led it back to their home.

Whenever he tested his arts against hers, in each case Liu Gang was no match for Lady Fan.

The time came for them to ascend to Heaven. In the outer courtyard there was a large locust tree. Liu Gang climbed several dozen feet up it, and then, by dint of effort, he managed to take off. Lady Fan simply sat down on her mat, and then, ever so lightly, she took off like a cloud of pneuma. They ascended together into the heavens and thus departed.

Master Whitestone was a disciple of the Master of the Dao of Central Yellow (Zhonghuang daoren). <He was already more than two thousand years old by the time of Peng Zu. He was unwilling to cultivate the way of ascending to transcendence, instead opting for nondying only, thus retaining the pleasures of the human realm. In what he relied upon as his practice, he took the Way of coupling as controlling and medicinal Gold Liquor as uppermost. At first he could not get this drug because he dwelt in poverty, so he raised sheep and pigs while living frugally for more than ten years, after which he exchanged them for ten thousand in cash. This he used to buy a large quantity of drugs, which he ingested.>

He regularly cooked white stones as his staple diet, and so he went to Whitestone Mountain to live, and that is how he came to be called Master Whitestone. He even consumed meat, drank liquor, and ate <foods prepared with> grains. He could walk three hundred or four hundred *li* in a day, and his visage and appearance never aged. <By nature he loved to do obeisance to and serve the gods, and he was fond of studying the *Hidden Scripture* (You jing) and *Traditions of Grand Simplicity* (Taisu zhuan).

Peng Zu asked him, “Why do you not ingest drugs that would enable you to ascend to the heavens?” Master Whitestone replied, “Can one amuse oneself on high in the heavens more than in the human realm? I wish only to avoid growing old and dying. In the heavens above there are many venerable ones to be honored, and to serve them there would be harder than to remain in the human realm.” People of his time therefore called him the Concealed Transcendent. They did so because he was not anxious to ascend to the heavens to become a transcendent official, nor did he seek fame.>

She Zheng, <styled Xuanzhen>, was a native of Eastern Ba. <He spoke of events of the time of the First Emperor of Qin in a way that suggested he had witnessed them himself. In the last years of the Han he and several dozen disciples> entered the Wu area. He always kept his eyes closed; <even when walking he did not open them.> None of the disciples who had followed him for decades had ever seen him open his eyes. But one of his disciples begged him to do it, so She Zheng opened his eyes for him. At the moment when they opened, there was a sound like a thunderclap and a brilliance like a flash of lightning <in the room>. All of the disciples fell down <unconscious>, and it was a long while before they could get up again. <By then She had closed his eyes once more.

She Zheng completed his Way without anyone's having noticed any special diet or other visible practices. But to all of his disciples he transmitted [methods of] circulating pneumas, bedchamber [arts], and the ingestion of a lesser elixir made from "stony brains."

It is said that Li Babai referred to She Zheng as "a lad of four hundred.">

<Guo Pu, styled Jingchun, was a native of Hedong. Wang Dun, wishing to launch a rebellion, had Guo divine his dream, saying, “Last night I dreamt I was working a plow in the river outside [the city of] Shitou. Divine it.” “By plowing in the river, one does not accomplish the hoped-for result. Just so, your rebellion will not succeed,” Guo replied. Wang grew angry and said to him, “Now divine how much longer you yourself have to live.” Guo said, “My life span is up this very day.”

Wang ordered him executed. Guo Pu said to the executioner, “When I was thirteen, I once took off my long gown and gave it to you by the fenced pond. My life is now in your hands. Here, use my sword.” Touched by the memory of Guo’s former kindness, the executioner carried out the sentence with tears streaming down his face.

Three days after the burial, people in the market at Nanzhou saw Guo Pu selling his everyday clothes and effects and chatting with acquaintances. When Wang Dun heard of it, he refused to believe it. He had the coffin opened. There was no corpse in it, for Guo had attained the Way of “escape by means of a simulated corpse.”

Today he is an earl among Water transcendents.>

Ge Xuan, styled Xiaoxian, received from Zuo Yuanfang the *Scripture on the Elixirs of the Nine Tripods* [and the *Scripture on the Elixir of Gold Liquor*. <Before he had synthesized any of the elixirs they prescribed,> he habitually ate attractylis. <He was especially adept at curing illnesses. Ghosts and demons would all manifest their forms before him; some of these he would send off, others he would execute. He could go for years without eating grains and without suffering hunger. He could pile up firewood, light it, and sit atop the pyre; the wood would be completely consumed, but neither Ge Xuan nor his clothing and cap would be burned.> After drinking a *hu* of liquor, he would lie down at the bottom of a deep spring and would not emerge until the liquor had worn off; when he did emerge, his body would not be wet.

<Ge Xuan was well versed in the Five Classics, and he was also fond of scholarly disputation. Several dozen curious youths followed him about as his disciples.> Once they were traveling by boat when [one of the disciples] noticed a box [of Ge's] containing several dozen talismans and other documents on wooden tablets. The disciple asked whether the talismans were effective, what they could do, <and whether he could see a demonstration. Ge replied, "What's the fuss about a talisman?"> He then took one of them out of the box and cast it into the river, and it made its way upstream against the current. <"What do you think?" Ge asked. "Strange!" replied the student.> Then Ge took out another talisman and cast it into the river as well; <it stood still and did not move. Then the downstream talisman came up, and the upstream one went down, and the two joined together in one place. Ge retrieved them. There was a woman by the riverside washing clothes. Ge said to the youths, "I'll send this woman running. How will that be?" The students said, "Great!" Ge threw a talisman into the water, and at once the woman ran off in fright; she ran for several *li* without stopping. Ge said, "I can make her stop." Again he threw a talisman into the water, and the woman at once stopped and returned. When someone asked the woman what had frightened her into running, she answered, "I myself don't know why I ran!"

Ge Xuan once stayed as a guest in someone's home while passing through Wukang. The host was sick and had commissioned a female spirit medium to call down a god on his behalf, to whom he was making offerings. Through the medium, the god commanded Ge to drink liquor, which Ge refused to do, and otherwise spoke rudely to him. At this, Ge grew angry and shouted, "How dare you, you perverse demon!" Ge Xuan then commanded the Five Earls to apprehend the god [through the medium], take him out, tie him to a post, and whip him. The medium then seemed to be led outside by invisible beings. Upon reaching the courtyard, the medium hugged a pillar as her gown was removed, then fell to the ground as a whipping sound was heard and blood was seen flowing from her back. Then, in a demonic voice, the god through the medium begged for its life. Ge said, "If I pardon you of this capital offense, can you cure this living person's illness?" "I can," said the god through the medium. "Very well, I will give you three days' time. If this sick man is not well by then, I will deal with you." The medium was released, and the host recovered from his illness.>

Ge Xuan once passed by a temple, <the god of which often forced travelers to dismount [and present offerings] when within a hundred paces [of the temple]. Inside the temple grounds were several dozen trees which were the home of many birds which no one dared molest.> Ge Xuan, riding a carriage, passed by without getting down. In a moment a great wind swirled up toward Ge's carriage from behind, scattering dust up into the sky. <Those following Ge all scattered, but> Ge only became incensed and cried, "How dare you, you little demon!" He raised his hand as if to stop the wind, and it died down at once. <Ge then rode back and threw a talisman up into the temple treetops. The birds there all fell dead to the ground, and within a few days, all the trees had withered even though it was the height of summer; and soon thereafter a fire broke out in one of the temple rooms and burned the temple completely to the ground.>

Once Ge Xuan saw a man selling fish <by a riverside>. He said to the fishmonger, “Might I trouble one of your fish to make a trip down to the River Earl’s abode?” The fishmonger said, “These fish are already dead. <How can you do that?>” “No problem!” said Ge. <So the fishmonger gave him a fish.> Ge wrote out something in vermilion on paper and stuck it down the fish’s belly. He then threw the fish into the water. After a little while, the fish returned and leapt up onto the riverbank. It disgorged a letter written in black on a green [paper] the size of a tree leaf.

Ge Xuan often entertained guests. He would go out to welcome the latecomers, while, meantime, seated and talking with the other guests was another Ge Xuan. When sending guests off, he did the same thing. <[Once] when the weather was cold Ge told his guests, “It is impossible in my humble abode for each of you to have his own fire, but I invite you to warm yourselves in common.” He then opened his mouth and exhaled flames, which quickly filled the room. All of the guests felt as if they were under a bright sun, but neither were they too warm.

[On another occasion] his students requested that Ge Xuan produce something to amuse them. At that time Ge was troubled by a fever; he had just been lying down to have someone sprinkle his body with powder, and had not yet dressed himself. So he answered, “My fever is acting up, and I can’t get up to amuse you just now.” He then slowly rubbed his belly many times against the beams of his room, then returned to his bed. Slowly the room filled with fragrance like a cloud, formed by the powder left by his belly on the beams. It lasted for several days.>

Ge Xuan was once dining with a guest when the conversation turned to arts of transformation. The guest said, “After we’ve finished eating, could you perform one special feat?” “Since you’re able not to be in a hurry [to see it],” Ge replied, “you’ll see it in a hurry!” With that, he spat out the food that was in his mouth, and it turned into several hundred large bees which all alighted on the guest’s body but did not sting. After the space of a meal, Ge opened his mouth again, and the bees all flew back into it; Ge chewed them up and ate them, for they had once again become the food he’d been eating.

Ge Xuan could point at a bed and cause it to move; he could point at toads or any other kind of crawling or flying creatures and cause them to dance to a beat just like people. He provided fresh melons and jujubes for his guests in winter, and in summer he procured ice and snow. Also, he would have someone drop several dozen coins down a well; then, holding a vessel, he would stand at the well’s opening and call, “Coins, come out” and at once the coins would come flying up one by one out of the well <and into the vessel>. They were always the same ones that had just been thrown in. Furthermore, when Ge served liquor to guests, no one would bring it in; the cups would simply arrive of themselves before the guests, and they would never move away until they were emptied of liquor. <By drawing on flowing water, Ge could cause it to reverse its current for a hundred feet.

Once there was a practitioner of the Dao from the central region who had some ability to cure the sick. He was deceiving people by saying, “I am several hundred years old.” Ge Xuan knew he was lying, so, at a time when many people were sitting at hand, Ge said to a friend, “Would you like to know this gentleman’s age?” “Certainly!” Suddenly a group of people descended from the heavens, sitting upright [in midair] and gazing watchfully about them. After a while they settled on the ground. They wore crimson gowns and “promoting-the-worthy” caps. They came into the group, approached the practitioner, and said to him, “The Celestial Thearch has ordered that we ask you your actual age, since you have lied to commoners about it.” Terrified, the practitioner got down from his couch and prostrated himself before them, saying, “Please forgive me! Really I am seventy-three.” At this, Ge clapped his hands and laughed heartily.

Then suddenly the crimson clad persons vanished. The practitioner was greatly ashamed, and it is not known where he went after that.>

The Wu emperor invited Ge Xuan for an audience, <wishing to bestow rank on him, but Ge would not accept [a post]. Ge then asked permission to leave, but the emperor denied it, detaining him as his guest and frequently taking Ge with him on excursions and at banquets.> Sitting in a tower, the two of them noticed some commoners by the roadside [performing a ritual] requesting rain. The emperor said, “The people are requesting rain. How can it be obtained?” “It’s easy to obtain,” replied Ge, and with that he wrote out a talisman and posted it in the earth-god shrine. Within the hour, the sky and earth darkened over and a great deluge fell. <A foot of water stood on the level ground in the [emperor’s] central courtyard.> The emperor asked, “Might it be arranged for there to be fish in the water?”

“Yes,” Ge replied, and he wrote another talisman and dropped it in the water. In a moment there were over a hundred large fish, <each one or two feet long,> swimming about in the water. <“Can they be eaten?” asked the emperor. “Yes,” said Ge.> So the emperor had them caught and prepared. <They were indeed real fish.>

Ge Xuan was once traveling by boat in the emperor’s entourage when the party encountered a severe wind. All of the other officials’ boats, large and small, capsized and sank; and so did Ge’s, and Ge could not be found. The emperor sighed and said, “Master Ge possesses the Dao, and yet he was unable to avoid this!” He climbed Fourviews Mountain [to keep a lookout], and he had boatmen drag the area for the sunken boat for a full week. Then suddenly Ge Xuan was seen emerging from the water. When he arrived [in the emperor’s presence], he still smelled of liquor. He apologized to the emperor, saying, “I should have been in attendance these last few days, but Wu Zixu detained me and I could not get away. I am sorry to have troubled you with the storm and water.”

Whenever Ge Xuan was out somewhere and ran into friends, he would sit down with them beneath a roadside tree. He would then cut a plant or pierce a tree and catch the sap, <which ran like a spring>, in a cup. <When the cup was full, the sap would stop running.> When drunk, it always tasted like fine liquor. Then Ge would take a clod of dirt, a stone, or a sprig from a plant and dip it in the liquor, and in the mouth it always tasted like <deer> meat. <When he cut the plant and held the cup under it, the sap would flow forth; when the cup was full, it would stop; and when anyone else held the cup, no sap would run out.

Once someone invited Ge Xuan to his home, but Ge did not want to go. But the host insisted, so Ge had no choice but to go along with him. When they had walked a few hundred paces, Ge suddenly felt a sharp pain in his belly; he stopped, fell to the ground, and in a moment was dead. When his head was lifted, it separated from his torso; when his four limbs were lifted, they, too, separated. He began stinking and rotting, and maggots infested him; one could not bear to go near him. The man who had invited him ran to inform Ge’s family, where he saw Ge sitting in the main room. He dared not mention anything about it but instead ran back to the place where Ge had died. His corpse had disappeared.

When Ge Xuan was walking with someone, he could cause both himself and his companion to hover three or four feet above the ground and walk along that way. Once when Ge Xuan was on a trip to Guiji,> a merchant who was returning <from the central region> was passing by a temple to a god. The god sent the temple recorder out to say to the merchant, “I wish to send a letter to Master Ge. Please see that it reaches him.” The recorder then threw the boxed letter onto the bow of the boat, where it stuck fast like a nail and could not be budged. When he

reached Guiji, the merchant informed Ge. When Ge went to retrieve the letter, he was able to pick it up easily.

Ge Xuan told his disciple, Zhang Dayan, “<Since I am being thus detained by the emperor, I do not have the leisure to prepare the great drug.> Now I will perform *shijie*. I will set out <at noon on> the thirteenth day of the eighth month.” When the time arrived, Ge dressed in robe and cap, <entered his chamber>, and lay down. He stopped breathing, but his color did not change. <His disciples lit incense and watched over him for three days. Then, at midnight, a great wind suddenly arose from inside the room, snapping trees [outside]; there was a sound like thunder, and the torches were all extinguished. After a while the wind died down. Ge had disappeared. All that remained was his abandoned garment atop the couch; the belt was not unfastened. In the morning they questioned the neighbors, and the neighbors said there had been no great wind [at their homes]. The wind had stopped at just this one residence, whose fence was flattened and whose trees were all snapped off.>

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Comments

It is decidedly odd, but has not to my knowledge been remarked on, that nowhere in an extant *Traditions* passage does Ge Hong refer to Ge Xuan as his own relative. Nor does Hong mention Xuan in his rambling autobiographical essay in *Outer Chapters*. (That may simply be because the *Outer Chapters* focus on moral and political themes, and Ge Hong may have felt a mention of Ge Xuan there to be out of place.) Yet twice in *Inner Chapters* Ge Hong refers to Ge Xuan as “my great-uncle, the Transcendent Sire,” and Hong’s official biography in the *History of the Jin* uses the same language in mentioning Xuan; and, as we have now seen, Xuan’s hagiography implies that he lived during the reign of Wu ruler Sun Quan (229–52 c.e.), and we know from Ge Hong’s official biography that his own grandfather (and Ge Xuan’s older brother), Ge Xi, held a high court post under Sun Quan. Clearly Hong never met Xuan, and the narratives about him collected in *Traditions* do not differ in tone from narratives about other figures and stretch credibility just as much.

It seems that, from Ge Hong’s point of view, his most important connection to Ge Xuan was not blood relation but textual filiation: as the first line of the hagiography states, Ge Xuan received certain alchemical scriptures from Zuo Yuanfang (Zuo Ci), and, in a famous passage in *Inner Chapters*, we learn that these same two scriptures were among the three Xuan transmitted to Zheng Yin; Zheng Yin, Ge Hong’s teacher, passed them on to him.

Turning our attention to the themes of Ge Xuan’s hagiography, we notice, first of all, that, despite the opening remark about his receipt of the great alchemical scriptures, Ge Xuan is nowhere described as preparing elixirs. At the narrative’s end we find a detailed scene of his “escape by means of a simulated corpse” preceded by his statement of motive for doing so: his detention by the ruler Sun Quan did not allow him the time needed to complete the “great drug”; Ge Xuan’s “escape” is therefore represented as having been as much an escape from the ruler’s demands of service (which he is depicted as refusing) as from the death-registration process. We never learn from this text, or from *Inner Chapters*, whether Ge Xuan subsequently achieved a higher, elixir-induced grade of transcendence, although later Shangqing and Lingbao texts have much to say on this question.

The Ge Xuan of *Traditions* is, in fact, less a master of alchemy than a typical “master of esoterica,” an adept who practices breath circulation and relies on a special grain-avoiding diet, who sees and controls spirits and is on familiar terms with local gods, who heals the sick, who exposes overweening gods and their mediums and fake practitioners of the Dao (both very vivid and significant passages), and who seems most memorable for his illusionary arts of multilocality and transformation and his manipulation of natural phenomena. The detailed description of his use of talismans is especially noteworthy in light of talismans’ importance in Ge Hong’s patrimony of texts and techniques.

The other facet of Ge Xuan’s hagiography worth mentioning here is its depiction of his busy social context. We see him moving freely in an aristocratic world that constitutes his audience, performing magical feats on command for the “several dozen” literate students who follow him about, for his dinner guests, and for the Wu ruler. It is while a guest in a layperson’s home that he bests and humiliates the female spirit medium who had been called in to cure the host’s illness; it is before his boatload of disciples that he toys with the riverside washerwoman, an innocent and perplexed bystander to his strange doings. If Ge Xuan’s religious practice ever entered an eremitic phase, it must have been after his disappearance via staged death, and we read nothing of it.

An item in Gan Bao’s *Inquest into the Spirit Realm (Soushen ji)* relates some of Ge Xuan’s wondrous feats and is clearly derived from *Traditions* or from its sources.

Wang Yuan, styled Fangping, was a native of Donghai. He was nominated as a Filial and Incorrupt and was appointed a Gentleman of the Interior and Grand Master of Palace Leisure at court. He broadly studied and mastered the Six Classics, but had especially good understanding of celestial patterns and the essentials of the He and Luo River Charts and [other] prognosticatory weft texts. He could predict the flourishing and decline of all beings in the heavens and among men, and could foretell fortune and misfortune in the nine provinces, <as easily as if he were gazing at them on his palm. Later he quit his offices and entered the mountains to cultivate the Way, and by the time his Way had been completed,> [Latter] Han Emperor Huan heard of him. The emperor summoned him to court repeatedly, but Wang would not appear. So an order was sent out to all kingdoms and commanderies to compel him to come to court. [After being brought in,] Wang simply lowered his head, kept his mouth shut, and did not reply to the edict. He only wrote an inscription on the palace gate; it consisted of over four hundred words, all concerning future events. The emperor disliked this and ordered the words effaced. The words on the outside [of the gate] were successfully removed, but the ones on the inside appeared even darker and were pressed into the grain of the wood. <The more they were erased, the more clearly they showed up.> Wang returned to his native village.

<Now Wang Yuan had no children. The people of his village, over several generations, helped to support him with donations.> A native of the same commandery, the Defender-in-Chief Chen Dan, built a Dao chamber for Wang, and morning and night he went to pay his respects to him, <asking only for his blessing and saying nothing of studying the Way.> Wang Yuan stayed at Chen Dan's house for over thirty years, <and during all that time there was no one in Chen's family who grew sick or died, including the servants and slaves; the domestic animals flourished, and the fields and orchards produced abundant yields.>

Suddenly one day Wang Yuan announced to Chen Dan: "The time has come for me to depart. I cannot remain here much longer. I will set out tomorrow at noon." At that very hour, Wang died. Chen knew he had departed as a transcendent <and so did not dare bury his body in the ground.> He only wept, sighed, and said, "The Master has abandoned me! <How can I bear it?>" And so he prepared a coffin and funerary implements and burned incense, and he approached the bed to wrap the body in clothing. But on the third night, the body disappeared; yet the cap and garments were completely undisturbed, like a cicada shell.

A little over a hundred days after Wang Yuan died, Chen Dan died, too. Some said that he had obtained Wang's Way and so [merely] transformed and departed; but others said that Wang knew Chen was destined to die soon, so he abandoned him and departed.

Wang Yuan's first thought was> to head east into Mount Guancang. Passing through Wu, he came to the house of Cai Jing at the Xu Gate. Cai Jing was only a peasant, but his bones and physiognomy indicated that he was fit for [eventual] transcendence. Wang Yuan realized this, and that is why he went to his home. <Said Wang to Cai: "By birth, you are destined to transcend the world; you will be chosen as a replacement for an office. But your knowledge of the Way is scant; your pneumas are few and you have much flesh. You cannot ascend [directly] in this condition, but must avail yourself of *shijie*. It's like passing out through a dog's hole, that's all."> Then Wang declared to Cai the essential teachings, <and left him. Soon Cai felt his entire body grow hot as if on fire. He craved cold water to bathe himself in; his entire family brought water and poured it over him, and it was like making steam by pouring water over hot

rocks. This went on for three days. Then, once his bones had completely dissolved, he stood up, went into his room, and covered himself with a blanket. Suddenly he had vanished. When his family looked inside the blanket, only his outer skin was left, intact from head to foot, like a cicada shell.>

After he had been gone more than a decade, he suddenly returned home one day. His face was that of a youth once more, and he had regained his strength; his hair had reverted to black. He announced to his family: "Lord Wang will arrive on the seventh day of the seventh month. On that day you must prepare great quantities of food and drink to offer to his attendants." On the appointed day, Cai's family borrowed vessels and prepared a vast quantity of beverages and food dishes, setting them out in the courtyard. Lord Wang did indeed arrive on that day. In advance of his arrival, the sound of metal drums, pipes, men, and horses could be heard. <The closer the sounds came, the more alarmed were the bystanders, for none could tell where the sounds were coming from. Then, when the party arrived at Cai's house, his entire family saw Wang. He was wearing a "long-journey cap" and a crimson robe with a tiger-head belt bag, a five-colored sash, and a sword.> He had a short yellow beard and was of medium stature. He was riding a feather-canopied chariot drawn by a team of five dragons, <each of them a different color. To the front and rear, the banners, pennants, insignia, and the train of armed attendants were all similar to those of a great general when he rides out. There were five hundred soldiers in twelve ranks, their mouths all sealed with honey, all astride dragon mounts; they descended from the sky to the music of pipes and drums and hovered in midair over the courtyard. The attendants were all over ten feet high, and they did not walk as humans do.

When the entire train had arrived, all of the attendants suddenly vanished and only Wang Yuan remained visible, seated. Cai Jing's parents, siblings, and in-laws were brought and introduced. Then Wang dispatched someone to summon "Maid Ma" (Ma gu). None [of Cai's family] knew who this Maid Ma was. The summons read: "Wang Fangping respectfully says: 'It has been a long time since you were in the human realm. I have come to this place today and was wondering whether the Maid would like to come and converse for a while.'" In a moment came a note in reply; the messenger was invisible, but the words of the note were read aloud, and they were these: "Maid Ma bows and says: 'Without our realizing it, more than five hundred years have passed since our last meeting! Noble and base have their proper order, so it is appropriate that I bow to you who are of superior rank. I am troubling your messenger to carry this to you for the moment, and I myself will arrive in the space of a meal. I must first carry out an order to stop by Penglai; I shall not be gone long, and as soon as I return I shall come to greet you personally. Pray do not leave until I have come.'"

Four hours later, Maid Ma arrived. In her case, too, the sounds of men and horses were first heard; then they arrived. Her train of attendants was half the size of Wang's. When she arrived at Cai's home, his whole family saw her as well.

She appeared to be a handsome woman of eighteen or nineteen; her hair was done up, and several loose strands hung down to her waist. <Her gown had a pattern of colors, but it was not woven; it shimmered, dazzling the eyes, and was indescribable—it was not of this world. She approached and bowed to Wang, who bade her rise. When they were both seated,> they called for the traveling canteen. The servings were piled up on gold platters and in jade cups without limit. There were rare delicacies, many of them made from flowers and fruits, and their

fragrance permeated the air inside [Cai's home] and out. When the meat was sliced and served, [in flavor] it resembled broiled *mo*, and was announced as *kirin* meat.

Maid Ma declared: "Since I entered your service, I have seen the Eastern Sea turn to mulberry fields three times. As one proceeded across to Penglai, the water came only up to one's waist. I wonder whether it will turn to dry land once again." Wang answered with a sigh, "Oh, the sages all say that the Eastern Sea will once again become blowing dust."

Maid Ma wanted to meet Cai Jing's mother, wife, and other [female] members of the family. Now, at this time, Cai's younger brother's wife had given birth to a child only a few days earlier. As soon as Maid Ma saw the young woman, she said, "Whew! Stop there for a moment and don't come any closer!" Then she asked that a small amount of uncooked rice be brought to her. When she got the rice, she threw it on the floor, <saying that she did so in order to dispel the unclean influences>. When everyone looked down, the rice grains had all changed to pearls. Wang chuckled, "It's simply because the Maid is young and I'm old that I no longer enjoy these sorts of <monkeylike> transformation tricks anymore."

Wang Yuan then announced to Cai Jing's family, "I wish to present you all with a gift of fine liquor. This liquor has just been produced by the celestial kitchens. Its flavor is quite strong, so it is unfit for drinking by ordinary people; in fact, in some cases it has been known to burn people's intestines. You should mix it with water, and you should not regard this as inappropriate." With that, he added a *dou* of water to a *sheng* of liquor, stirred it, and presented it to the members of Cai Jing's family. On drinking little more than a *sheng* of it each, they were all intoxicated. After a little while, the liquor was all gone. <Wang dispatched attendants, saying, "There's not enough. Go get some more." He gave them a thousand in cash, instructing them to buy liquor from a certain old woman in Yuhang. In a short while, the attendants returned, saying, "We have secured one oilcloth bag's worth, about five *dou* of liquor." They also relayed a message from the old woman in Yuhang: "I fear that this earthly liquor is not fit to be drunk by such eminences.">

Maid Ma's fingernails resembled bird claws. When Cai Jing noticed them, he thought to himself, "My back itches. Wouldn't it be great if I could get her to scratch my back with those nails?" Now, Wang Yuan knew what Cai was saying in his heart, so he ordered him bound and whipped, chiding, "Maid Ma is a divine personage. How dare you think that her nails could scratch your back!" The whip lashing Cai's back was the only thing visible; no one was seen wielding it. Wang added, "My whippings are not given without cause."

Cai Jing had a neighbor whose family name was Chen; his given name has been lost. He had once served as a district-level commander. Hearing that there was a divine personage at Cai's house, he appeared at the gate, knocking his head on the ground and seeking an audience. So Wang Yuan directed for him to be brought forward. This man requested to be made a Supporting Express Courier like Cai Jing. Wang told him to stand facing the sun for a moment; while he did so, Wang regarded him from behind. Then Wang pronounced: "Whew! Your heart is perverse and not correct. You will never be able to be taught the Way of transcendence. [But] I will bestow on you the office of Agent Above the Earth." When he was about to depart, Wang placed one talisman and one text in a small box and gave this to Commander Chen, declaring to him: "These will not cause you to transcend the world, but they will at least prolong your original life span to beyond the age of one hundred. You can [also] use them to dispel

misfortunes and cure illnesses. If there are those who [are ill but] whose allotted life spans have not yet run out and who are without sin, then take this talisman to their homes and they will recover at once. If there are perverse ghosts and blood-eaters who wreak hauntings and curses, then, by wearing this talisman at your waist and using the text, you will be able to order earth-shrine lictors to round up and send off these ghosts. In your heart you will also know which cases are serious and which are light, and can resolve each situation as you deem appropriate.”

Commander Chen used this talisman to cure illness, and enjoyed success. Several hundred families served him. He lived to be one hundred ten years old, then died. After that, some of his disciples tried to activate his talisman, but it was no longer efficacious.

<After Wang Yuan had departed, the large quantity of food and drink that Cai Jing’s family had prepared were all consumed, even though no one had been seen eating or drinking them. Cai’s parents discreetly asked him, “What sort of divine personage is Lord Wang? At what places does he reside?” Cai answered, “He usually resides at Mount Kunlun, but he also travels back and forth to Mount Luofou and Mount Guancang. Atop each of these mountains is a palace from which Lord Wang oversees the affairs of the Celestial Courts. Every day he is in touch with Heaven above a dozen or more times; in all matters of birth and death on earth, in [the several jurisdictions of] the Five Marchmounts, reports are made first of all to Lord Wang. When Lord Wang goes forth [from one of the palaces], he sometimes does not take his entire retinue of officials but only rides a yellow donkey and takes about a dozen attendants. Wherever he goes, maintaining an altitude of several thousand feet, the mountains and forests can be seen below; and at each place he arrives, the gods of mountains and waters come forth to greet, welcome, and do obeisance to him.”

Several decades after this,> Cai Jing again temporarily returned home, for Wang Yuan had [another] text to bestow [via Cai] on Commander Chen. The characters in this book mostly resembled seal script; some were Perfected Writ. The characters were large and were widely spaced. Chen [and his family] preserved it for generations, <recording it as an autograph text of Lord Wang, along with the talisman and text in the small box.>

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Comments

As Fukui Kojun has noted, the hagiography of Wang Yuan and Ma gu is unusually long, but it is not uniquely so in *Traditions*. It is also unusual in other ways, and is richly instructive. For convenience, let us divide the narrative into parts and discuss each in turn.

(1) Wang Yuan’s training. At first Wang is portrayed as the consummate official-class master of esoterica (*fangshi*), learned in both the Confucian classics and the wèifú texts that collected around them during the Han; it is these latter texts that enable him to predict the future. But then he heads to the mountains and “completes his Way,” the content of which is nowhere so much as hinted at. As if to underscore his new identity, he is next shown stalwartly refusing to speak with the ruler of the court he had once served.

(2) His time with Chen Dan and attainment of transcendence. Here we see a striking example of lay-adept relations: the people of his village “support him with donations over several

generations” (he is childless), and the official Chen Dan hosts him for “over thirty years”; what is more, Chen Dan builds a “Dao chamber” for Wang and twice daily performs a simple ritual of obeisance, “asking only for blessing.” We are given to understand that the benefits Chen derived from this arrangement consist of the health and prosperity of his entire family, including its animals, crops, and lands. It is difficult not to see in these details something quite similar to the symbiotic relationship between Buddhist monks and nuns, on the one hand, and Buddhist laity, on the other; there, too, what flows to the adepts is usually material support (including the construction of dwellings) and what flows from them to their lay patrons is merit and hence blessing.

The scene depicting Wang’s entry into transcendence is a typical example of “escape by means of a simulated corpse”: the announcement of the precise day and time of “death,” the three-day interval, the gown and cap found undisturbed (“like a cicada shell”) and doubtless serving as Wang’s replacement body. Note, too, Chen Dan’s role: like some other patrons in *Traditions*, he knows his part in the drama, waiting the requisite period instead of rushing to burial, preparing the coffin and other funerary implements so as to put on a convincing performance for the spirit officials who will come to retrieve what they take to be Wang’s corpse. Meanwhile Wang heads for distant mountains, as practitioners of this mode of transcendence are scripturally enjoined to do.

(3) Wang’s instruction of Cai Jing. Wang Yuan displays an ability much prized among the early medieval aristocracy, that of recognizing hidden talent in people, here accomplished by reference to the candidate’s “bones and physiognomy” (*guxiang*); as explained elsewhere, these indicate—to those who know how to read them—a person’s latent features and allotted life span. Cai Jing’s shortcomings, among which are his low social status and “much flesh” (transcendents were visually depicted in this period with emaciated bodies), oblige him to perform a type of *shijie*—ranked by Ge Hong as the lowest of routes to transcendence (yet one that Wang Yuan himself also seems to have employed). The ensuing passage is one of the few I have encountered that describe how this process *feels*. Cai Jing’s is not a typical case, however. His *shijie* is not so much an escape by means of a merely simulated corpse (i.e., a *shi* in the sense of a ritually efficacious simulacrum of and stand-in for a deceased person) as it is a refinement—note, once again, a *three-day* refinement—of his impure body, one that dissolves his old bones (the seat of life span allotment) and leaves behind not his clothes, shoes, staff, or sword but his “outer skin.” In this type of case, *shijie* would perhaps be best rendered as “release from one’s corpse,” where the “corpse” is all the dross of one’s own former, impure body, refined away to leave one with a newly incorruptible body. Cai Jing, by means of whatever secret method Wang Yuan conveyed, must undergo in this drastic, intense, and rather passive form the sort of bodily refinement undertaken more gradually and self-directedly by most of the adepts portrayed in *Traditions*. This mode of *shijie* looks backward to older texts such as the *Xiang’er Commentary* and the *Taiping jing* that imagined the bodily refinement process as occurring in the afterlife zone of Grand Darkness (Taiyin), and it anticipates the detailed workings out of such refinement processes (whether accomplished in this world or the next, preor postmortem) in the Shangqing and Lingbao movements.

(4) The gathering at Cai Jing’s home on the seventh day of the seventh month. The first thing we notice about this lengthy scene, the heart of the hagiography, is its date. The seventh day of the seventh month, like some other calendrical “doubles” (the third of the third, the fifth of the fifth), was a festival day. The festival in this case marked the night on which two asterisms normally separated by the Celestial River (our Milky Way)—identified in most texts as the Weaver Girl and the Herder Boy—met as lovers in their annual tryst. This festival had

apparently only existed for a century or two in Ge Hong's day; there is precious little evidence of it before the end of the Han (although certain Han narratives imply that the seventh of the seventh was a day when communication between Heaven and Earth was especially easy), but Zhou Chu's late-third-century *Record of Local Customs (Fengtu ji)*, focusing on seasonal festivals in the Yixing district of Wu (in modern Jiangsu Province), very clearly describes a festival on this date and links it with the meeting of the asterisms Weaver Girl and River Drummer. On this night, according to Zhou's *Record*, people sprinkled and swept their courtyards, set out offerings of wine, dried meats, and fruit preserves on tables, and prayed to the two constellations for the fulfillment of a wish—such things as wealth, longevity, and sons. Only one wish was allowed, and if one kept it a secret *for three years* it was apt to be granted.

While there is little indication that Wang Yuan and Maid Ma are to be identified with the astral deities—and there are sources that point to a different sort of identity, as we will see shortly—their meeting on this date (they arrive separately from distant places), the implicitly erotic nature of their relationship, and the quantity of food and drink offerings set out in the Cai family's courtyard all clearly suggest an association with the festival. Their offerings are more than matched by the exotic delicacies of the traveling canteen, although Wang's and Ma's footmen and attendants do not disdain them: after the banquet, Cai's family find all their dishes depleted.

Commander Chen is of a type with Fei Changfang (in the Hu gong hagiography): both men, found unfit for transcendence, are granted the lesser office of Agent Above the Earth, discussed above. Note that the curative power of the talisman bestowed on Chen is enough to inspire “several hundred families” to “serve” him and to enable him to live past a century—but that it can be activated only by Chen and not his disciples. It is a onetime dispensation.

Cai Jing's answer to his family's puzzlement about the identity of Wang Yuan is one of the most detailed *Traditions* passages about the administrative workings of the unseen realm of transcendents.

When we turn from the *Traditions* hagiography to other early documents, it becomes apparent that both Wang Yuan and Maid Ma had once been local gods of the eastern coastal region who were now, by means of narratives such as that in *Traditions*, being gathered into the company of transcendents.

To *Arrayed Marvels (Lieyi zhuan)*, a late-second or early-third-century collection of anomaly accounts credited to Cao Pi (187–226 c.e.), are attributed three fragments touching on our figures. In one, Wang Fangping is portrayed as a “god” or “spirit” (*shen*) who descended to one Chen Jiefang to present him with a pair of apotropaic swords. In another we read: “The Lord of Donghai [surely Wang Yuan's divine title] had a blue shortcoat woven and left it behind [as a gift] for Chen Jiefang.” The third gives a version of the incident of Cai Jing's inappropriate fantasy concerning Maid Ma and her luxuriant four-inch nails. Here, Cai Jing's home is located in Dongyang; he is not whipped but rather flung to the ground, his eyes running blood; and Maid Ma herself, identified as “a divine transcendent” (*shenxian*), is the one who reads his thoughts and does the punishing.

Another collection of anomaly accounts, Liu Jingshu's early-fifth century *Garden of Marvels (Yiyuan)*, contains even more revealing material:

During Qin times, there was a Temple to Maid Mei—or, as one version has it, Maid Ma—beside a lake. When alive, she had possessed arts of the Dao. She could walk on water in

her shoes. Later she violated the laws of the Dao, and her husband, out of anger, murdered her and dumped her body in the lake. Following the current, it floated on the waves until it reached the [present site of] the temple. A subordinate shaman directed that she be encoffined but not immediately buried. Very soon a square, lacquered coffin appeared in the shrine hall. [From then on,] at the end and beginning of each lunar month, people there could make out through the fog an indistinct figure, wearing shoes. Fishing and hunting were prohibited in the area of the temple, and violators would always become lost or drown. Shamans said that it was because the Maid had suffered a painful death and hated to see other beings cruelly killed.

From this story, which bears all the marks of a temple's founding legend, it would appear that Maid Ma's cult was originally that of a powerful but wronged human being and that it was rooted in a particular locality "beside a lake"—probably Lake Gongting. Some vague "arts of the Dao" are attributed to her, but the main source of her numinosity seems to have been her wrongful death, as was typical of local cults. Note that the story claims her cult existed already in Qin times.

One other collection of anomaly accounts, roughly contemporaneous with Garden of Marvels, records a bizarre story about Maid Ma—here said to have been "a commoner of Fuyang," with not a hint of her divinity or transcendence—and her extreme love of hashed (normally uncooked) meat. Having caught an anomalous creature with features of both sea turtle and serpent, she and her companion, one Hua Ben, prepare it—after its complete transformation into a turtle—and eat it. She soon grows ill, and something blocks her throat; when she opens her mouth toward Hua Ben, he is terrified to see a snake opening its mouth and flicking its tongue toward him from inside Maid Ma's throat. Later, when Maid Ma catches sight of the stripped skin of a snake that has been caught inside Hua's home and prepared as a meal (a sample of which Maid Ma has already eaten and found delicious), she vomits blood and dies—seemingly because the snake is a relative of the creature now living inside her. This story hints at an even older stratum of legend behind the Maid Ma cult: like other territorial gods known to Chinese religious history, she may have begun as a theriomorphic deity (perhaps snake-headed) who gradually metamorphosed into a human being and finally—the process culminating in Ge Hong's Traditions narrative—into a full-fledged transcendent. Seen in this light, several details of the Traditions hagiography might be read as betraying these chthonic origins. Among these are Maid Ma's long nails, the featuring of meat dishes among the fantastic foods served by the traveling canteen, and the scene describing the "summoning" of Maid Ma, which is reminiscent of shamanic invocations of deities to attend spirit-writing sessions.

In Inner Chapters, Ge Hong mentions Wang Yuan once in passing, in a discussion of apotropaic methods useful when traveling in mountains: "Some carry Wang Fangping's male yellow [realgar] pills at their waist." In Ge's autobiography in Outer Chapters, it may be Wang Yuan who is intended by the name Fangping, a personage whose example Ge aspires to follow.

Later Daoist sources record the existence of temples and steles to Maid Ma as well as an altar atop Maid Ma Mountain. Sites on her mountain figure in canonical lists of sacred places—"Heaven-reaching grottoes" (dongtian) and "blessed grounds" (fudi).

Finally, it should be noted that although Robinet takes Wang Yuan and the figure known as "Lord Wang of Xicheng" (Xicheng Wang jun), an important revealer of texts and transmitter of methods in the Supreme Purity tradition, to be the same personage, I suspect that this is not the case and that we have to deal with two distinct figures.

Liu An, Prince of Huainan, was a grandson of Han Emperor Gao. He was fond of <Confucian studies and of > esoteric skills. He wrote an *Inner Book (Neishu)* in twenty-one chapters; he also wrote <“central chapters” (*zhongpian*) in eight sections, which spoke of matters concerning divine transcendentals and the “yellow and white” and were titled *The Swan’s Jewel (Hongbao)*. And> he wrote the *Myriad Ends (Wanbi)* in three fascicles, which discussed ways of transformation.

There were Eight Sires who went to call on him. The gatekeeper, acting on his own initiative, harried them with questions, <saying, “The Prince’s foremost desire is to obtain ways of extending one’s years, forestalling the time [of one’s death], [getting] long life, and nonaging. His next desire is to obtain great scholars who are broadly learned and can enter into the subtle meanings [of texts]. And his last desire is to obtain brave, stalwart warriors with the strength to lift cauldrons and the ferocity to scare off tigers. Now you gentlemen are already decrepit. Obviously you possess neither the arts with which to forestall your decline nor the [natural] strength of a [Meng] Ben or a [Xia] Yu. How could you penetrate [matters such as those discussed in] the *Three Tombs (Sanfen)*, *Five Exemplars (Wudian)*, *Eight Cords (Basu)*, or *Nine Hills (Jiuqiu)*, or reach matters of the utmost depth and remoteness, or exhaust hidden principles and natures? And since you fall short in these areas, I dare not proceed further.”

The Sires laughed and replied: “We have heard that the Prince honors the worthy and is fond of scholars, treating them with indefatigable courtesy, so that even those with only a single talent are unfailingly brought in. The ancients esteemed the nine times nine [types of] study and supported even those [whose only talent was] to mimic birdcalls and dog barks. Their earnestness was such that they desired to buy mere horses’ bones so as to collect a Qiji and serve a Master Guo as their teacher so as to assemble a crowd of erudites. Although we are decrepit and do not match what the Prince is seeking, we still wish to be allowed to see him just once. Even if we bring him no benefit, we will not, on the other hand, cost him any loss. And why should we be disliked on account of our old age? It must be that the Prince declares anyone who is young to be in possession of a Way and anyone whose hair has turned white to be a common person. But we fear that that is not what is known as ‘turning over a stone to find jade’ or ‘reaching into a grotto to find a pearl.’ If he is treating old men such as we as of no account, then let us now become young.”>

As soon as they had spoken these words, the Eight Sires transformed into youths of fifteen with elaborately coiffed black hair and skin the color of peach blossoms. At this, the gatekeeper was shocked and ran to inform the Prince. Upon hearing the news, the Prince immediately rushed out to greet them, not even stopping to put on his shoes. Together they climbed the Longing for Transcendence Tower, where [the Prince] spread out brocade canopies and ivory mats, lit hundredharmonies incense, brought out stools of gold and jade, and comported himself as a disciple. <Facing north, he folded his hands and said, “Despite my only average talent, I have loved the Dao and its Power since my youth. But I am reined and fettered by the affairs of this world. Mired among the common run of humanity, I am unable to leave behind my ties, shoulder a satchel, and dwell in mountains and forests. Nevertheless, morning and night I have hungered and thirsted after divine illumination and the cleansing of my defilements. My dedication has been shallow, my ambition unfulfilled, and [my goals lie] as distant as the Milky Way. I did not expect to receive such great favor as this descent and visit from you Lords of the Dao. It must be due to [what is written in] the register of my allotted life span that I am being thus promoted. Confronted by both joy and fear, I do not know what to do; I only beg you Lords of

the Dao to take pity on me and teach me, that I might, like a caterpillar who borrows a swan's wings, depart from Earth and fly up to Heaven!"

At this, the Eight Sires changed back into old men and declared to the Prince: "Although our knowledge, too, is shallow, we are each equipped with what we have previously studied. Knowing that you love the Dao, we have come to attend you, but we do not yet know which [of our arts] interests you. One of us can sit and summon wind and rain, stand and call up clouds and fog, draw on the ground to form rivers, and pile up soil to form mountains. One of us can topple mountains, plug up springs, tame tigers and leopards, summon dragons and krackens, and dispatch spirits and ghosts. One of us can divide himself into multiple bodies, alter his countenance, appear and disappear at will, conceal the six [types of] troops, and bring on darkness in broad daylight. One of us can ride in emptiness, pace the void, cross over the ocean waves, enter and exit where there is no open space, and go a thousand *li* in a single breath. One of us can enter fire without being burned, enter water without getting wet, take knife blows without being cut, get shot at without being pierced, not feel cold in the depths of summer and not sweat in the height of summer. One of us can transform himself in myriad ways, become whatever he pleases, turn into a bird, beast, plant, or tree in an instant, move all manner of creatures and land formations at will, and transport palaces and houses. One of us can quell fires, rescue others from danger, avoid all manner of calamities, extend his years, and lengthen his life span [to reach] long life. And one of us can decoct clay to form gold, distill lead to form mercury, refine the eight minerals, fly aloft with the 'flowing pearl,' ride dragons hitched to cloud [-carriages], and drift and wander about in the [Heaven of] Grand Purity. [Which arts you study] depends entirely on your desire."

From this point on, Liu An paid obeisance to the Eight Sires day and night, personally serving them liquor and fruit. Before [studying] each art, he asked for a demonstration of it; all of them—the transformations, the winds, rains, clouds, and fogs—proved effective.> So he came to receive from the Sires a scripture on elixirs, [one on] thirty-six esoteric methods involving "liquid <silver," and others.>

[Later,] when Liu An was falsely accused by the Gentleman of the Interior Lei Bei of plotting rebellion, he ascended into Heaven with the Eight Sires. Imprints were made in the mountain stone on which they [last] stepped, and today the tracks of humans and of horses are still visible there.

Legend has it that, as Liu An was in the process of departing as a transcendent, there was a bit of his medicinal compound left over in a basin in the court. His chickens and dogs pecked at or licked out the basin and they all flew upward as well.

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Comments

The bulk of Ge Hong's hagiography of Liu An is taken up with his relations with the Eight Sires. Liu's suitably grateful and self-deprecating response to them, as contrasted with his gatekeeper's haughty and suspicious response, models how persons of high status should treat visiting adepts. Liu An accordingly joins the select ranks of potentates who manage to achieve transcendence.

Perhaps the most memorable detail in Liu An's story is the ascent of his domestic animals in his wake (reminiscent of the ascent of Tang Gongfang's whole household with him): so powerful are the elixirs that they can convey even dogs and chickens to celestial transcendence.

By including an entry on Liu An maintaining that he had successfully departed into transcendence from a mountaintop, Ge Hong knowingly joined an old controversy. The histories clearly stated that Liu An wrote treatises on arts of transcendence, but they also clearly stated that he was executed for political reasons in 122 b.c.e. Sometime between his death and the writing of Wang Chong's *Arguments Weighed in the Balance*, perhaps completed between 70 and 80 c.e., it began to be claimed that Liu An had not really died in 122 but had achieved transcendence. Wang Chong summarizes and debunks this legend. To my knowledge, this is the earliest extant text to mention the Eight Sires in connection with Liu An as well as the ascension of Liu's domestic animals. Claims of Liu An's transcendence are also debunked in Ying Shao's *Comprehensive Account of Customs* (*Fengsu tong yi*, written between 197 and 204 c.e.), in which a version of the legend is given. Ge Hong sought to restore Liu's place among transcendents and hence to defend the efficacy of alchemical arts against such Latter Han detractors as Wang Chong and Ying Shao.

For Ge Hong, Liu An represented, among other things, an early link in the filiation of certain texts that had come down to him — texts that he regarded as inferior to those at the heart of his own tradition (the Three Sovereigns and Taiqing scriptures) but that were nevertheless useful.

Ge Hong's hagiography is complemented by his treatment of Liu An in *Inner Chapters*. He first mentions Liu in connection with the Han court bibliographer and (according to the traditional attribution shared by Ge) hagiographer Liu Xiang:

People of our time, because Liu Xiang did not succeed in fabricating gold, say that he meddled in hidden affairs, performed strange arts, and delighted in transmitting vacuities, and that his *Arrayed Traditions [of Transcendents]* is a work of falsehood. Alas! This is a case of "discarding a foot-square-sized night-shining gem because of a tiny crack." ... [Accounts of] the fabrication of gold are in all the collections on divine transcendents. The Prince of Huainan extracted from them to form his *Esoteric Book of the Swan's Jewel*. Although this work has written materials [on alchemical methods], it conceals the most essential things about them, which can only be transmitted by an orally conveyed commentary on the text; only then can the gold be made. And the names of many of the medicinal ingredients mentioned in it have since changed, so that the text cannot be directly employed as it stands.

When Liu De, Liu Xiang's father, came into possession of this book while in charge of the case of Liu An, he did not have it properly transmitted to him by a teacher. And so when Liu Xiang, who had no understanding of arts of the Dao in the first place, happened to encounter this book, he assumed that its meaning was conveyed exhaustively on the surface of the paper on which it was written, and that is why his attempt to fabricate gold [based on it] failed.

At his next and last mention in *Inner Chapters*, Liu An is glimpsed in the heavens by a practitioner whom Ge Hong considered to be a charlatan, Cai Dan, already mentioned above and discussed in part 1. The speaker is Cai Dan:

In former times when Liu An, Prince of Huainan, ascended to the heavens for an audience with the Thearch on High, he sat spread-legged, spoke loudly, and referred to himself as “I, the single man.” For this he was assigned to guard the celestial latrine for three years.

Gan Bao’s *Inquest into the Spirit Realm*, probably written only shortly after *Traditions*, contains a version of Liu An’s initial meeting with his eight guests; this version is most notable for including the text of a song Liu An is said to have sung to the eight visiting transcendents—something not found, to my knowledge, in other early sources.

A cult site dedicated to Liu An and the Eight Sires was established in the Huainan area at some point; perhaps it already existed in Ge Hong’s day. Li Daoyuan’s (d. 527) *Annotated Classic of Waterways* (*Shuijing zhu*), after remarking that “Ge Hong realized that [Liu An] had attained the Dao, and he included the matter in his *Master Who Embraces the Unhewn and Traditions of Divine Transcendents*,” gives a fascinating eyewitness description of the temple to Liu An on Eight Sires Mountain in or near Shouchun district:

I climbed to the top of the mountain. I heard nothing of the tracks of men and horses, and only the temple [and its] image were still extant. In the temple [presumably on a wall] was drawn an image of Liu An and the Eight Sires. They were shown seated casually under a canopy, all dressed in beautiful gowns and feathered cloaks. Their mats, bottles, and pillows were all like ordinary ones. In front of the temple is a stele that was erected in the tenth year of the *yongming* reign period of the Qi dynasty [late 492 or early 493 c.e.]. The mountain has hidden chambers and stone wells.

Laozi (Master Lao, or the Old Master) had Chong'er as his name, Boyang as his style. He was a native of Quren hamlet, Ku district, in the kingdom of Chu. His mother felt a great meteor enter her, and thus she conceived. But, although he received his pneumas from Heaven, since he was born into the Li family he took Li as his surname. Some say Laozi was born before Heaven and Earth were. Some say he was produced from celestial cloud-souls or essences and that he must have been some sort of deity or numen. Some say his mother carried him seventy-two years before finally giving birth and that when he was born he emerged by piercing through her left armpit; and that he was born with white hair, hence was called Laozi. Some say that his mother <had no husband and that> Laozi was the surname of her family. Some say that his mother gave birth to him under a plum tree and that, being able to speak at birth, he pointed at the tree and said, "I'll take this as my surname."

Some say that in the Upper [portion of the] Era of the Three Sovereigns he was Ritual Master of the Mystic Center; that during the Lower [portion of] that era he was Thearch-Lord of the Golden Porte; that during the era of Fu Xi he was Master Denseflower (Yuhua zi); that during the era of the Divine Husbandman he was Old Master Nine-Numina (Jiuling Laozi); that during the era of Zhu Rong he was Master Far-reaching Longevity (Guangshou zi); that during the era of the Yellow Thearch he was Master Far-reaching Attainment (Guangcheng zi); that during the era of Zhuan Xu he was Master Red Essence (Chijing zi); that during the era of Thearch Ku he was Master Lutu; that during the era of Yao he was the Master Who Has Completed His Striving (Wucheng zi); that during the era of Shun he was Master Yin Shou (Yin Shou zi); that during the era of Yu of the Xia [dynasty] he was the Master Who Has Perfected His Practice (Zhenxing zi); that during the era of Tang of the Yin [dynasty] he was Master Xi Ze; and that during the era of King Wen [of the Zhou dynasty] he was Master Wen Yi—and one version adds that [under the Zhou] he served as Archivist. <Some say that in [the kingdom of] Yue he was Fan Li, that in [the kingdom of] Qi he was Master Chi Yi, and that in [the kingdom of] Wu he was Tao Zhugong. Such opinions appear in all sorts of books, but they do not appear in the correct scriptures of divine transcendence, and> they are unreliable.

<My own view is that, if Laozi were indeed a celestial essence or deity, then there would have been no era in which he did not appear. And he would indeed have stepped down from positions of honor to occupy lowly stations; he would have lowered himself from lofty reclusion to assume laborious tasks; he would have abandoned [celestial] purity and entered into [earthly] impurity; he would have relinquished his celestial post and accepted human rank. Now as long as there have been a Heaven and an Earth, so long have there been arts of the Dao. How could there ever have been a period when practitioners of arts of the Dao were lacking? Therefore it is hardly surprising that,> in every era from Fu Xi down to the three ancient dynasties, various persons have become noted for their arts of the Dao. <But why must we regard them all as the same, single person, Laozi? These sorts of speculations are the product of recent generations of practitioners, lovers of what is marvelous and strange, who have created them out of a desire to glorify and venerate Laozi. To discuss it from a basis in fact, I would say that> Laozi was someone who was indeed particularly advanced in his attainment of the Dao <but that he was not of another kind of being than we.

According to the *Records of the Historian*, Laozi's son was named Zong; he served as a general in the Wei kingdom, and thanks to his merit was enfeoffed at Duan. Zong's son was Wang; his son was Yan; Yan's great-grandson was Xia, an official under the Han. Xia's son Jie was the Grand Mentor of the Prince of Jiaoxi, and his family lived in Qi. From this it can be seen that the view that Laozi was originally a deity or numen must stem from practitioners of the Dao of shallow views who wished to make Laozi into a divine being of a kind different from us, so as to cause

students in later generations to follow him; what they failed to realize was that this would cause people to disbelieve that long life is something attainable by practice. Why is this? If you maintain that Laozi was someone who attained the Dao, then people will exert themselves to imitate him. If you maintain that he was a deity or numen, of a kind different from us, then his example is not one that can be emulated by practice.>

Some say that as Laozi was about to head out west through the pass, the keeper of the pass, Yin Xi, realizing that he was no ordinary man, followed after him and asked for his Dao, and that Laozi, shocked and amazed by this, stuck out his tongue a very long way (*danran*), and that this is how he came to be called Lao Dan. This is also false. According to today's *Scripture of the Nine Transformations* (*Jiubian jing*) and the *Scripture of the Twelve Transformations of the Primordially Engendered One* (*Yuansheng shierhua jing*), Laozi definitely already had the name Dan before he entered the pass. [And] Laozi changed his name and style several times; he was not only called Dan. Bearing this in mind, it may also be noted that according to the *Scripture on the Nine Palaces*, the *Scripture on the Three and Five*, and the *Scripture of the Primordial Epochs*, each person in his or her life has certain perilous conjunctions; when he reaches these times, he [should] change his name and style according to the sound corresponding to <the changes in> his birth pneumas. In this way he can extend his years and escape the peril. Nowadays there are still practitioners of the Dao who do this. Laozi was alive in the Zhou for over two hundred years. In over two hundred years' time there must surely have been more than one perilous conjunction. This explains why his names and styles are relatively many.

If one wishes correctly to determine the facts about Laozi, one should take historical writings and records of actual events, along with the scriptures on transcendence and esoteric writings, as primary, and compare these with one another. Any other sources may be vulgar speculations, containing much that is false. <I note that in the [*Scripture of*] *Western Ascension*, the [*Scripture on*] *Laozi in the Embryonic State*, the [*Scripture on*] *Returning to the Shoots of One's Life-Allotment*,> *The Pearly Scabbard and the Jade Tablet*, and the *Esoteric Scripture on Golden Slips*, it is stated — by all of them alike — that Laozi was of a yellow <and white> hue, had elegant eyebrows, a broad forehead, long ears, large eyes, and widely spaced teeth, as well as a square mouth and thick <lips>. On his forehead there were patterns [symbolizing] the three [powers] and the five [phases], the sun and the moon. His nose was high and straight. His ears had three apertures each. On the soles of his feet were [patterns symbolizing] yin and yang and the five [phases], and in the palms of his hands there was the character “ten.”

During the reign of King Wen of Zhou, Laozi served as Palace Librarian; under King Wu, he served as Archivist. Common people of that time, noting his longevity, called him Laozi (the Old Master).

<Now when people receive their allotted life spans, some are naturally endowed with the capacity to communicate with spirits and perceive distant phenomena; the pneumas with which they are blessed are not the same as those of ordinary people. Such people are fit to become lords in the Dao, such that they come to be aided by celestial spirits and followed by numerous transcendents. As such a person, Laozi made available many methods for transcending the world, including, [first of all,] [formulas for] nine elixirs and eight minerals, Liquor of Jade and Gold Liquor; next, methods for mentally fixing on the mystic and unsullied, meditating on spirits and on the Monad, successively storing and circulating pneumas, refining one's body and dispelling disasters, averting evil and controlling ghosts, nourishing one's nature and avoiding grains, transforming oneself [so as to] overcome trouble, keeping to the teachings and precepts, and dispatching demons. In all, [the writings on these methods] came to nine hundred thirty fascicles, plus seventy fascicles of talismanic texts. All of these texts are listed in the *Central Slips on Laozi's Origins* (*Laozi benqi zhongpian*). Since this text gives a bibliographic catalog,

any texts that are not found among these titles [can be identified as]> something that later Practitioners of the Dao have added on their own initiative; they are not authentic writings.

<Laozi was tranquil and yielding, and harbored no desires. He devoted himself wholly to the pursuit of long life. This is why, although he [served] under the Zhou for a long time, he never rose in rank. He seems to have wished [outwardly] to blend in with others while> inwardly realizing naturalness. <Then, when his way was completed, he departed, surely as a transcendent.

Confucius once went to ask Laozi something about the rites. At first he sent [his disciple] Zigong ahead to him. When he arrived, Laozi said to him, “Your master is the one named Qiu. If he follows me for three years, then at that point he should be teachable.”

When Confucius himself met Laozi, Laozi told him, “A good merchant hides his goods so that [his shop] appears empty. A true gentleman hides his integrity so that he appears dull. Quit your haughty bearing! You are spoiling your aim with too many desires. None of these is of any benefit to you!”>

[On another occasion] Laozi came upon Confucius while he was reading. “What book is that?” he asked. “*The [Book of] Changes*,” answered Confucius; “the [ancient] sages also studied it.” “It’s all right for the sages to have studied it,” Laozi said, “but for what purpose are you studying it? <What is the gist of it?” “The gist is in goodwill and duty,” Confucius replied. Laozi responded, “When mosquitoes and gadflies sting the flesh, we lie awake all night long. If we let goodwill and duty torment our hearts and keep them restless, there is no disorder worse. The snow goose wants no daily bath to make it white, the rook no daily inking to make it black. It is inherent in Heaven to be high, in Earth to be thick, in the sun and moon to shed light, in the stars to form constellations, in trees and plants to have their distinctions. If you too go forward cultivating the Dao, you will already have attained the utmost. Why be so busy proclaiming goodwill and duty, like the man banging the drum as he goes looking for lost sheep? You are disrupting human nature, sir.”

[On another occasion,] Laozi asked Confucius, “Have you after all attained the Dao?” “I’ve searched for it for twenty-seven years and have not found it,” answered Confucius. Laozi said, “Supposing the Dao could be offered up, there is no one who would not offer it to his lord. Supposing the Dao could be presented as a gift, there is no one who would not present it to his relatives. Supposing the Dao could be told to others, there is no one who would not tell it to his brothers. Supposing the Dao could be bequeathed, there is no one who would not bequeath it to his children. That we cannot do so is for this reason alone: unless you have an appropriator within to make it your own, the Dao cannot take up residence in you.”

[On yet another occasion,] Confucius said, “I have studied the [classics of] *Songs, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*. I have chanted the way of the former kings and made plain the imprints of the Dukes of Zhou and Shao in order to introduce myself to over seventy rulers, but still I have not been employed. How hard people are to persuade!” Laozi replied, “The Six Classics are the worn footprints of the former kings, not what they used to imprint. What you are cultivating yourself in now is all worn footprints, and footprints are where the shoes have passed, they are not the shoes!”

When Confucius returned [from seeing Laozi], he did not speak for three days. Zigong thought it strange and asked him why. Confucius said, “When I see that someone is thinking like a bird in flight, I refurbish my thinking into a bow and shoot at him, and never have I failed to hit and retrieve him. When I see that someone is thinking like a deer, I refurbish my thinking into a running dog and pursue him, and never have I failed to catch him. When I see that someone is

thinking like a fish in the deep, I refurbish my thinking into a hook and line and cast for him, and never have I failed to hook him and reel him in. But when it comes to a dragon, riding clouds and vapor, roaming about in the Grand Purity empyrean, I am unable to pursue him. Today I saw Laozi, and how like a dragon he is! My mouth gaped so wide I could not get it shut; my tongue protruded so far I could not get it back in. My spirits were thrown into confusion and did not know where to lodge.”

When Yangzi went to see Laozi, Laozi told him, “It’s the elegant markings of the tiger and leopard and the spryness of monkeys which draw the hunter’s shot.” “May I inquire how an enlightened king rules?” Yangzi asked.

“When the enlightened king rules
His deeds spread over the whole world but seem not from himself.
His riches are loaned to the myriad things but the people do not depend on him. He
has integrity, but no one mentions his name or station.
Immeasurable, he roams where nothing is.”>

When Laozi was about to leave [China] and head west through the pass to ascend [Mount] Kunlun, the keeper of the pass, Yin Xi, having divined from the wind and pneumas, knew that a godlike person was due to pass through. So he swept the road <for forty *li*>. Upon seeing Laozi, <he realized he was the one whom he expected. In China, Laozi had never bestowed his teachings on anyone. But,> recognizing that Yin Xi was fated to obtain the Dao, Laozi stopped [for a while] beneath the pass.

<Now Laozi had a retainer named Xu Jia who, from his youth, had been hired out to Laozi for the price of a hundred pieces of cash per day. By this time Laozi owed him 7,200,000 pieces. When Xu realized that Laozi meant to exit through the pass very soon and travel on, and that he would not obtain what he was owed, he solicited someone to name Laozi in a complaint to the keeper of the pass. But the person making the complaint did not realize that Xu had been following Laozi for over two hundred years; he only reckoned on the large sum Xu was due to receive, and on this basis he betrothed his daughter to Xu. Xu, for his part, was delighted upon seeing that the girl was comely.

When the complaint was communicated to Yin Xi, he was shocked and saw Laozi about it. Laozi said to Xu Jia, “You were due to die long ago. When I hired you, you were an official’s slave from a poor family, and I lacked an attendant, so I gave you a Grand Mystery talisman for living purely, and that is how you have lived down to this day. How can you speak against me now? And I told you before that when we reach Parthia I would settle with you in gold. Why couldn’t you wait?”

With that, Laozi had Xu Jia open his mouth toward the ground. The Grand Mystery perfected talisman at once emerged onto the ground, the cinnabar writings on it as good as new, and Xu became a pile of dried-up bones. Yin Xi, knowing that Laozi was a divine person and that he was capable of bringing Xu back to life, knocked his head on the ground on Xu’s behalf, pleading for his life and also requesting to make the payment to Xu on Laozi’s behalf. Laozi then tossed the Grand Mystery talisman onto the bones once more, and Xu immediately returned to life. Yin Xi then gave Xu Jia two million in cash and sent him off.

Yin Xi then performed the rites due from a disciple to a master.> Laozi bestowed on him all of the matters pertaining to long life. <Yin Xi further asked for teachings and precepts, whereupon Laozi spoke five thousand words to him. Yin Xi then withdrew and> wrote these down, titling them the *Classic of the Way and Its Power (Daode jing)*. <He practiced Laozi’s way and so came to obtain transcendence himself.>

Han Empress Dou believed in Laozi's words, so Emperor Wen and all the members of the Dou clan could not but read them. <Upon reading them, they all benefited greatly, and that is why the empire was at peace during the reigns of [Emperors] Wen and Jing and why the Dou clan preserved its glory for three generations more.

The Grand Mentor of the Crown Prince, Shu Guang and his son deeply understood the meaning [of Laozi's words] and so perceived the relative value of withdrawing oneself [from service] versus completing one's merit [in office]. They quit their posts on the same day and returned home, distributing their money and dispensing kindness, and thus protected their purity and honor.

And so it goes for all practitioners who seclude themselves. All who venerate the arts of Laozi scorn glory and ornamentation without while nourishing life and longevity within; they avoid falling into the dangerous world. Seeing that his abundant spring has flowed down for so long and has formed such a vast ocean, how could Laozi be anything other than an exemplary teacher and standard established by Heaven and Earth for a myriad successive generations?> That is why all followers of Zhuang Zhou [Zhuangzi] take Laozi as their ultimate progenitor.

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Comments

No figure of hagiography, theology, or devotion is more central in the Daoist tradition than Laozi. For that very reason, there is no single, canonical image of Laozi in the tradition, just as there was never a single ecclesiastical body to create such an image (although emperors and their associated Daoist scholiasts sometimes tried); rather, there are competing images promoted by different authors and subtraditions. When Laozi's very names proved malleable, it need not surprise us that every other aspect of his identity was open to constant reconstruction as well. Ge Hong's hagiography affords an opportunity not to quest for the historical Laozi (many scholars doubt that such an individual ever existed) but to assess what sort of image Ge's particular persuasions led him to create — and, in this case, how his construction of “Laozi” diverged from its competitors.

Late Warring States and early Han texts portray Laozi as a court official, as a human sage whose philosophical wisdom qualified him to instruct even Confucius (and not merely on the rites, as stated in Sima Qian's biography in *Records of the Historian*), and as the author of the famous *Classic of the Way and Its Power* (*Daode jing*), which he is depicted as somewhat reluctantly depositing with Yin Xi, guardian of the pass, on his way out of China to the West. To this image, the Han-period *Arrayed Traditions of Transcendents* added the significant line, “He was fond of nourishing his essence and pneumas, and gave precedence to [arts of] acquiring [energy] without dispersing it,” and to Laozi's older characterization as a “sage” (*shengren*) this text added the appellation “perfected person” (*zhenren*). These aspects of Laozi's *Arrayed Traditions* hagiography reflect the extent to which Laozi was already being appropriated as an exemplary practitioner of self-cultivation methods such as breath circulation and perhaps sexual arts. Meanwhile, under the Latter Han emperor Huan (r. 147–68 c.e.), Laozi became the recipient of an imperial sacrificial cult, the performance of which was marked by a famous stele text of 165 c.e. that has come down to us. That text refracts not one but three images of Laozi: as a cosmic, periodically transmuting deity coexistent with the beginnings of the universe, resident

in the heavens where he channels communications between the celestial and terrestrial realms; as a transcendent who, although once mortal, practiced such techniques as “concentrating his thoughts in his cinnabar fields and in the [somatic] Purple Chamber of the Grand Monad” (*cunxiang dantian taiyi zifang*), such that, “when his Way was completed, his body transformed, and like a cicada he traversed the world”; and as a teacher of sagely rulers since the era of Fu Xi, when human culture first arose. The second and third centuries had seen the rise of the Celestial Master religion in the southwest and its spread across the north, with its conception of Laozi as the divine embodiment of the Dao who reappeared in history in 142 c.e. to initiate a covenant with the religion’s founder, Zhang Ling.

Against this only briefly sketched background — of most of which Ge Hong was aware, of some of which (particularly the Celestial Master religion) he seems not to have been extremely well informed — let us examine Ge Hong’s Laozi, beginning with the main *Inner Chapters* passages about him and then moving on to the *Traditions* hagiography.

The many *Inner Chapters* passages about Laozi present him under four main guises. In what is arguably their ascending order of importance to Ge Hong, they are as follows.

(1) Laozi is a celestial deity or deified transcendent of whom meditating adepts seek longevity-inducing visions and to whom alchemy practicing adepts direct offerings.

(a) Seeking visions of Laozi. Ge Hong describes a procedure by which — preferably in a quiet mountain forest free of distractions — the adept gazes into one or more “bright mirrors” of a certain dimension while fixing his thoughts. After seven days and nights, one or more gods or transcendents will appear in the mirror(s). “One who wishes to cultivate this Way must first secretly recite the surnames, styles, ranks, and titles of all the gods one expects to arrive and appear, as well as their offices, gowns, and caps. Otherwise, when the gods suddenly arrive one will forget who they are or be harmed from fright.” Various spirit officials may appear, some of them with animal bodies, others with a forbidding martial air, but Ge Hong advises the reader:

[F]ocus your thoughts solely on the perfected bodily form of Lord Lao. When the perfected bodily form of Lord Lao appears, rise and bow repeatedly. Bear in mind before Lord Lao’s perfected bodily form that he is surnamed Li, named Dan, and styled Boyang. His body is nine *chi* long and of a yellow hue. His mouth is beak-shaped, his nose high; his elegant eyebrows are five *cun* long, his ears seven *cun*. He has three vertical veins on his forehead. His feet bear the eight trigrams. He reclines on a divine tortoise. [He resides in] jade chambers in a golden tower with steps of silver. A five-colored cloud is his raiment; his cap is many-tiered, his sword is sharp-pointed. In his train are one hundred twenty yellow youths. To his left are twelve green dragons; to his right, twenty-six white tigers; before him, twenty-four vermilion sparrows; behind him, seventy-two dark warriors. His vanguard is twelve *qionggi* beasts, his rearguard thirty-six evil-dispellers. Above him, thunder rolls and lightning flashes. (These details appear in the scriptures on transcendence.) If you see Lord Lao, your years of allotted life will be extended; your mind will become as the sun and moon, and there will be nothing you do not understand.

This list of features differs from the one given in *Traditions*, but in both cases we have to deal with an inventory of physiognomic signs, somatic markings that bespeak the nobility of the bearer — and in this passage the divine body comes into view surrounded by a majestic visual context of palatial halls and awesome escorts.

The celestial, divine Laozi is also the one invoked in the remarkable story of Cai Dan, the misguided seeker of transcendence who, returning home after nearly starving in the mountains, explained his failure to his puzzled family by saying that, as a result of minor negligence, he had been demoted from his entry-level job tending the dragons in Lord Lao's stable.

(b) Offerings to Laozi. At the end of both of his major *Inner Chapters* discussions of alchemical methods, Ge Hong specifies that such procedures require the construction of altars, the making of libations and sacrifices, and the burning of incense to four (or in one passage three) deities who must be present for the process to succeed. The three deities listed both times are Taiyi, the Mystic Woman (Xuannü), and Lord Lao; the fourth deity mentioned in one passage is the Primal Sovereigness (Yuanjun), who, as will be seen below, was Laozi's teacher. This passage suggests that the deities presiding over alchemical work consisted of two male-female couples; the female of each pair was a celestial goddess and the initial divine revealer of the alchemical scripture to her male disciple.

(2) Laozi exemplifies the possibility of achieving transcendence while nevertheless retaining certain ties to the social world. Laozi, like Peng Zu, is mentioned more than once in *Inner Chapters* lists of ancients who succeeded in both holding office and attaining transcendence. Sometimes Ge Hong writes as if he considers this dual vocation a live option for his own time, and his own life trajectory could be cited as an instance; at other points he writes as if it were possible only in the simpler, purer days of old and is now effectively foreclosed by the demands of society's increased complexity and artifice. In answer to the challenge that transcendence seeking risks severing offerings to ancestral spirits, Ge similarly holds up Laozi as the star example of one who pursued transcendence and yet maintained the continuity of ancestral offerings by fathering a son. "Therefore, all those of today who practice transcendence can of course have children and disciples so as to continue sacrificial offerings. For what reason would the offerings need to be cut off?"

(3) Laozi is the very synecdoche of the quest for transcendence, the prototype and ideal of all practitioners who seek to transform themselves into deathless beings. Just as the figure of Laozi symbolizes, for Ge Hong, the quest for transcendence, his superior position relative to Confucius symbolizes the proper relation between the esoteric and the Confucian traditions.

Interlocutor: "Confucius remarked that everything that had ever existed had died; Laozi said that divine transcendence can be practiced. I submit that the words of the sage [Confucius] are credible and supported by evidence, and that what was said by the Daoist (daoia) [Laozi] is exaggerated and hard to apply."

The Master Who Embraces the Unhewn: "Confucius is a sage among Confucians; Laozi is a sage among those who have attained the Dao. The Confucian teachings are close at hand and easy to encounter, so those who honor them are many; the meaning of the Dao is distant and hard to recognize, so those who have reached it are few. The Dao is

the wellspring of all things; Confucianism is but the current of a major stream... To treat Confucius alone as important while slighting Laozi is like enjoying the flowers at the tip of the branch while remaining ignorant of the trunk from which they stem.”

Laozi and his enterprise are the ideal on which forestand mountain-dwelling practitioners set their sights. That enterprise or life’s work (ye) was “long life and enduring vision” (changsheng jiushi), a goal ignored by those who view the Daode jing only as a work of philosophy.

Laozi further exemplifies the need to study toward and practice transcendence.

Transcendence is not something that simply happens to a person, it must be achieved; if even Laozi had to study to attain it, how much more must we. Laozi was a human being, not of a different species of being than we, and so we have the capacity to follow his example: “In the cases of Peng [Zu] and Lao[zi], they were still human beings; it is not the case that they achieved unique longevity by virtue of belonging to a different species of being. That by which they attained the Dao was not the result of its simply happening.”

(4) Laozi is the source of important methods, texts, and talismans used by transcendence seekers; these include but are not limited to alchemical methods. In *Inner Chapters*, he is credited with some herbal remedies, with two prognosticatory scriptures of seemingly apocalyptic overtones (one of the few points at which Ge Hong touches on apocalyptic themes, so prevalent in early Daoist traditions), with both the Grand Monad method of making Gold Liquor and the Divine Elixir of Taiqing (both of which he received from the Primal Sovereign), and with a large proportion of the talismans handed down in texts to which Ge Hong had access. Of these talismans, Ge writes:

Lord Zheng [Ge’s teacher] said all of the talismans stemming from Lord Lao were in celestial script (tianwen), and that because Lord Lao could communicate with spirits, the talismans had all been transmitted to him by spirits. Today, when someone uses one of them to little effect, it is because they originated many eras ago and many errors have been introduced during copying.

Turning now to Ge Hong’s *Traditions* hagiography of Laozi, we may, for convenience, divide it (and our discussion) into nine parts.

(1) Laozi’s miraculous conception and birth. Seidel notes that this element of the Laozi legend cycle is first attested among extant sources in *Traditions*. Similar legends of miraculous conception had circulated around such mythical culture heroes as the Yellow Thearch, the Flaming Thearch, Yu the Great, and the Divine Husbandman, as well as around Confucius. And Han weft texts show a similar preoccupation with the distinctive marks on the faces, limbs, and torsos of the same sages. But some details of the Traditions account betray an imitation — probably a consciously competitive imitation — of the conception and (more especially) birth scenes of the two earliest-known Chinese versions of the life of Gautama Buddha. The earlier of these scriptures was prepared by a group of Sogdian and Indian translators in the very last years of the second century or very first years of the third century, presumably in the environs of Luoyang; the later was a compilation (completed sometime between 225 and 250), based in part on the earlier text, by Zhi Qian, a thoroughly naturalized lay Buddhist and a high official of the same Wu court in which Ge Hong’s grandfather served. These details include the following:

(a) Conception following descent of meteor. Indigenous legends of other sages contained similar scenes, and in the case of the Buddha it is not a meteor but a white elephant (a transformation of the future sage's own body) that enters the holy mother.

(b) Birth from left armpit and under a tree. The Buddha emerges from his mother's right armpit, under a tree. (In one text, he also first enters his mother through her right armpit.)

(c) Ability to speak at birth; immediate, religiously significant declaration, accompanied by hand gesture. Laozi, in one of the versions related by Ge Hong, points at the plum (*li*) tree under which he has just emerged and declares that his surname will be Li (for, in this version, he has no father and hence no lineage-derived surname). The future Buddha, on alighting on the ground, immediately takes seven strides and (in Zhi Qian's version) raises his right hand and declares: "In the heavens above, and beneath the heavens, it is only I who am a Worthy. The three realms suffer; how can they be made joyous?"

(d) Detailed attention to somatic markings. The list of physiognomic features (*xiang*) that appears later in Ge Hong's hagiography parallels the attention to the thirty-two somatic marks (Sanskrit *lakranas*, rendered in our texts as *xiang*) in both Buddhist texts. As noted above, such lists also appear in weft text legends of Confucius and other indigenous sages.

(2) Laozi's transformations. Ge Hong mentions seventeen of these, including the sage's conventionally familiar stint as Lao Dan, Archivist under the Zhou. Here his sources are clearer: he paraphrases passages found in more than one scripture of the sort studied (in a later recension) by Seidel. Note that a few of these esoterically posited identities are the subjects of separate *Traditions* hagiographies. Ge Hong, however, did not think of them as transformations of a divine Laozi; he cites these legends only to debunk them.

(3) Laozi as a once-human transcendent, not a cosmic deity or personification of the Dao so exalted as to be different in kind from humans. Ge Hong's clear and sustained argument to this effect, paralled in some Inner Chapters passages considered above, constitutes the very heart of his hagiography of Laozi and his distinctive contribution to the considerable body of Laozi lore in the various Daoist traditions. His Lord Lao is, to be sure, a higher being to be visualized and venerated, but he is also an exemplar to be followed by practitioners.

If *all* the names listed in the transformation texts did not in fact belong to the single being Laozi, then how are we to account for the fact that Laozi seems, nevertheless, to have gone by a confusing variety of names and styles? Ge Hong's alternative and rather ingenious explanation provides us with an important insight into certain techniques associated with "escape by means of a simulated corpse": to change one's names, shift one's residence, and substitute an object for one's own body in the grave are all interrelated methods of avoiding periodic, astrally coordinated calamities and registration by life span-limit-enforcing spirits.

(4) Laozi's physiognomy. As mentioned above, this feature of the hagiography links Laozi to a mythical pattern of the bodily appearance of great sages, a pattern both indigenous and Buddhist. In China, such passages must all be understood in light of the old arts of physiognomy, one of the classes of special knowledge long claimed as the preserve of masters of esoterica. According to these arts, one can read the body — particularly the head and face — like a text, discerning in its shapes and markings the otherwise hidden characteristics of the bearer. In transcendence quest, Daoist, and Buddhist practice, however, this detailed lingering over distinctive somatic marks — so puzzling to many Western readers — carries an additional significance: as

clearly explained by Ge Hong in one of the *Inner Chapters* passages discussed above, it is by detailed knowledge of the bodily appearance (as well as the names and titles) of higher beings that one becomes able to fix them properly in one's optical field during visualization practices, or to recognize them when they appear in response to one's entreaties.

(5) The esoteric methods made available by Laozi as a "leader in the Dao." These, manifested in scriptures and talismans, span the entire hierarchy of types of methods envisioned by Ge Hong, from some of the alchemical scriptures most prized by him, through apophatic meditation and pneuma-circulation techniques, down to dietary guidelines and demonand spirit-controlling devices. For Ge, there was no category of cultivational practice, with the possible exception of sexual arts, to which Laozi had not contributed significantly.

(6) Laozi's departure as a transcendent. With the statement "When his way was completed, he departed, surely as a transcendent," Ge Hong fits Laozi into the narratological mold typical of *Traditions*; Laozi thus joins the ranks of the many other figures about whom similar statements are made. This would have formed a natural conclusion to the hagiography, but there were two remaining bodies of lore surrounding the figure of Laozi that would have been familiar to readers and that Ge Hong therefore had to incorporate or address.

(7) Laozi's encounters with Confucius and Yangzi. As seen above, the material on his dialogues with Confucius is the oldest stratum of Laozi lore. Ge Hong adds nothing to their substance, in fact extracting large chunks of text from the *Zhuangzi*; but in placing them in this new context, he dramatically reframes these old passages, and we now understand that the man who showed himself superior in wisdom even to Confucius, and who dispensed political advice to Yangzi, was a transcendent in training—more specifically, an early progenitor of alchemical practice.

(8) Laozi's bestowal of scriptures and teachings on Yin Xi and the Xu Jia episode. Again, Laozi's textual transmission to Yin Xi was old news; again, however, it is here reframed, and the *Daode jing* becomes simply one among "all of the matters (*shi*) pertaining to long life." (The *Daode jing* itself is thus also recast as a text that teaches one among many sets of principles conducive to longevity.) In the strange story of Xu Jia, unattested (to my knowledge) before the early Song, we have a vivid example of the vivifying (here, probably, because death register-evading) power of Laozi's talismans.

(9) Postscript: Laozi's legacy. The hagiography ends by pointing downward in time to Ge Hong's own day and beyond: first by noting some of the commendable effects of Laozi's principles on Han society, then by elevating Laozi over *Zhuangzi* as a model for contemporary emulation (a seeming jab at the sort of *Zhuangzi*-inspired indifference to death mocked more explicitly by Ge in *Inner Chapters*).

The process of mourning, for the passing of spirit and time. The blood line keeps merging, flowing, sinking. Breath propelled into motion out of space. All the deaths before us, what flight are you taking?

TRST invites you to join our first reading session, *Body So Low*. The text chosen is *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*¹, a collection of biographies, or eulogies, attributed to Ge Hong² from the 3rd-4th century China, about ordinary human beings on the quest for radical departure. In other words, “They shed their mortal forms and melted away.”

As an obscure and unfamiliar text, *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* was compiled in the beginning of the formation of Taoism. These practitioners demonstrated the use of matter and process as supposed means of achieving what cannot be simply understood as the obviation of death, but rather to attain an exalted state of existence through assimilating to and connecting with distant realms. The attainment assumed a process of inner studies and enhanced awareness of reality.

We hope this somehow opaque text could bring thoughts towards imagining questions such as how to act radically; overcoming fear; afterlife of institutions; matter and spirit in consumerism; friendship and kinship in different spaces and temporalities; and together we collect inspirations from the text and celebrate. We are not searching for any solutions in this journey of reading.

[1] According to some assumptions, *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Shen Xian Zhuan) that has come down to us is not exactly the same text that Ge Hong wrote, based on the observation of textual inconsistencies. The version we use is translated by Robert Ford Campany (2002).

[2] Ge Hong (283-345), is a Jin Dynasty (265-420) scholar, best known as author of the *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Baopuzi).