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Becoming Laozi: Cultivating and Visualizing Spirits in Early-Medieval China

The practice of visualizing spirits arose for the first time in China during the first few centuries of the common era. This is also the period when, again for the first time, we find the claim that at least some texts are not the products of humans but are rather the result of divine revelation. And, intriguingly enough, many of the texts that discuss spirit visualization are claimed to be such products of divine revelation.

This paper will be an attempt to discuss two of these texts – *Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 and *Huangting jing* 黃庭經 (outer version) – that advocate forms of spirit visualization and also claim to be products of divine revelation. I will also discuss the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary to *Laozi*, which argues for related practices, again claimed to be from divine revelation. Several scholars have provided excellent studies of these practices in general and these texts in particular.¹ My goal will be to add to this scholarship by focusing on a historical reading of the overall arguments of the texts in terms of their relationship to earlier religious practices: how and why do they appropriate earlier religious practices, why do they argue as they do for these practices, and why, in the context of the time, were these arguments significant? In short, although much work has been done in analyzing the visualization practices themselves, more work remains to be done in providing the historical contexts in which to understand why the practices arose, why

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¹ The following works in particular have been a constant source of help and inspiration: Kristofer M. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: U. California P., 1993); Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: U. Massachusetts P., 1981); Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity*, trans. Julian F. Pas and Norman J. Girardot (orig. French version 1979; Albany: State University of New York, 1993); Stephen Bokenkamp, “Traces of Early Celestial Master Physiological Practice in the *Xiang'er* Commentary,” *Taoist Resources* 4.2 (Dec., 1993), pp.

they became significant, and why they were associated in this period with divine revelation.

To explicate the arguments, I begin with a short discussion of some of the religious practices in early China to which these visualization practices were responding and from which they were appropriating.

THE CONSTRUCTED LINEAGES OF THE DIVINE: SACRIFICE IN CHINESE ANTIQUITY

The first major tradition upon which spirit visualization practices built was that of sacrifice. Although the spirit visualization practitioners were explicitly opposed to sacrifice, they nonetheless built upon much of the logic of early Chinese sacrificial practice. A brief review of early Chinese sacrifice will thus be helpful.

The landscape in early China was haunted – filled with ghosts and spirits who were seen as highly capricious and extremely dangerous. Humans were thus constantly attempting to use sacrifice to control and mollify the divine powers, and ideally to transform them into ancestors and spirits who would actually act on behalf of the living humans. The logic that underlay this was one in which sacrifice would provide names and forms to spirits and thus define them (as ancestors, supportive spirits, and so forth) and to some extent control them.

In terms of the later debates over sacrificial practice, two forms of this practice are particularly relevant. The first was the classical model, employed in the courts of the Zhou, and then reinterpreted and ultimately redeployed in a very different form at the imperial court beginning in the late Western Han. In the interpretations to be found in the sacrifice chapters of the *Liji* 禮記, ghosts would be transformed into

37–51; Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1997); Stephen Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2007); Fabrizio Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2006); Fabrizio Pregadio, “Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy,” in Benjamin Penny, ed., *Daoism in History: Essays in Honour of Liu Ts’un-yan* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 121–58; Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2009); Robert Ford Campany, “Making Scenes: Disciplines of Visualization in Early Medieval China,” (paper presented at “A Workshop on Kinetic Vision in Early Medieval China,” organized by Tian Xiaofei; Harvard University, May 2007); Terry Kleeman, “Daoism in the Third Century,” in Florian C. Reiter, ed., *Purposes, Means and Convictions in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), pp. 11–28; Gil Raz, “Imperial Efficacy: Debates on Imperial Ritual in Early Medieval China and the Emergence of Daoist Ritual Schemata,” in Reiter, ed., *Purposes, Means and Convictions in Daoism*, pp. 11–28; Tian Xiaofei, “Seeing with the Mind’s Eye: The Eastern Jin Discourse of Visualization and Imagination,” *AM* 3d ser. 18.2 (2006), pp. 67–102.

ancestors and lineage relationships would thus be constructed through the sacrificial offerings to them. The ruler alone would be allowed to offer sacrifices to Heaven, thus making himself into the Son of Heaven. He would also be defined as the father and mother of the people – thus becoming the central figure linking all of the lineages together under Heaven.² The latter notion was defined ritually by the fact that those under the ruler would eat the leftovers from his sacrifices.³ Sacrifice, in other words, allowed the practitioners to construct lineage relationships with capricious divine powers, transforming ghosts into ancestors and transforming a human into the Son of Heaven. At the central court, this would result in a social hierarchy in which the ruler is the center, ritually offering to Heaven, with the populace arrayed below him in ranked order, ritually eating the leftovers of the ruler's offerings.⁴

In opposition to this model was the imperial model, created with the Qin empire and developed further by Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BC), in which the Great One (Taiyi 太一) was posited as an even higher deity than Heaven. The ruler would circulate throughout the realm, personally performing sacrifices to the local gods. The emperor would thus directly link the various local spirits together. The ruler would ultimately become himself divinized and immortal through this process, become closer to the Great One, and gain dominance over the local deities.⁵

In the 30s BC, the court swung decisively against Han Wudi's system and fully supported the classical model as outlined in the *Liji*.⁶

² Michael Puett, "The Offering of Food and the Creation of Order: The Practice of Sacrifice in Early China," in Roel Sterckx, ed., *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 75–95.

³ Michael Puett, "Combining the Ghosts and Spirits, Centering the Realm: Mortuary Ritual and Political Organization in the Ritual Compendia of Early China," in John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, eds., *Early Chinese Religion: Shang Through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 695–720.

⁴ Michael Puett, "Human and Divine Kingship in Early China: Comparative Reflections," in Nicole Brisch, ed., *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2008), pp. 199–212.

⁵ Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), pp. 225–58.

⁶ For the late-Western Han ritual reform, see Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China: 104 BC to AD 9* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974); Wang Baoxuan 王葆玟, *Xihan jingxue yuanliu* 西漢經學源流 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1994); Marianne Bujard, *Le sacrifice au ciel dans la Chine ancienne: Théorie et pratique sous les Han Occidentaux* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2000). I have also discussed the debates in chap. 8 of my *To Become a God*.

SELF-DIVINIZATION

The second body of material that the visualization practices were building upon is what I have elsewhere called self-divinization literature – materials that claim humans to have spirits within their body that, if properly cultivated, allow the adept to himself become more refined and to draw closer to the One. Here, however, the One is defined not as the highest deity, but rather as the source of the energies that pervade the cosmos. By drawing close to it, the adept ultimately himself becomes divinized.⁷

These self-divinization techniques, which began emerging in the fourth century before the common era, were explicitly opposed to sacrifice – instead of transforming divine powers through sacrifice, the goal was to divinize the adept and gain powers over the spirits directly. Although the techniques did not involve visualization of spirits, they did involve nourishing them, keeping them in place within one’s body, and linking them through the circulation of energies (*qi* 氣) and essence (*jing* 精) throughout the adept’s body.

The reader will undoubtedly note how close these self-divinization practices are to the imperial sacrificial system instituted under Han Wudi, even though the former are opposed to sacrifice and the latter are predicated upon sacrifice. In both cases, the goal is to nourish the spirits, link them directly through the adept, and thereby get closer to the Great One and thus gain immortality and divinization. The difference is that what in the imperial model is done through the ruler’s physical circulation throughout the realm is done in the self-divinization literature within the adept’s body. As I have argued elsewhere, the two practices were clearly related. Indeed, lengthy discussions of self-divinization techniques are to be found in *Huainanzi* – a text that was put together by Han Wudi’s uncle at his court in Huainan, one of the most powerful kingdoms in the Han empire, only a few decades before Han Wudi would consolidate his sacrificial system.⁸ Both of these were part of the extreme forms of divinization being supported in the early Han court – forms of divinization and imperial excess that the court reforms in the 30s BC ultimately overthrew.

As we shall see, the spirit visualization practices that arose in Chinese late antiquity were building upon both of these earlier practices.

⁷ Examples include the “Neiye,” “Xinshu, shang,” and “Xinshu, xia” chapters of *Guanzi*. For a fuller discussion of the self-divinization literature, see Puett, *To Become a God*, pp. 109–17.

⁸ The fact that Liu An would later be charged with treason helped the *Huainanzi* to be seen later as an oppositional text in the early Han. But, when it was being composed, it was very much a part of the early-Han imperial culture. See Puett, *To Become a God*.

But in both the imperial forms of sacrifice and the self-divinization practices, the emphasis was on humans utilizing these techniques (whether sacrifice or cultivation) to control and ultimately gain the powers of the divine. In contrast, the spirit visualization practices that arose in the first several centuries of the common era explicitly move in the opposite direction: these are not human attempts to define and demarcate divine powers and place them into a hierarchy of human construction, nor was it an attempt to cultivate the divine powers in order to divinize the adept. Although the adept does achieve transcendence through these practices, the practices are revealed by a higher deity, and the adept is undertaking the practices only by following this higher deity.

A MORAL COSMOS

In searching for earlier examples of comparable cosmologies based upon a higher god granting teachings to humanity, one has to look in some surprising places. One of the only bodies of materials from the pre-Han period of China that upholds a claim of divine revelation is that of the Mohists, an early religious community. The Mohists held that Heaven created the cosmos. Moreover, Heaven for the Mohists was a moral deity – not at all capricious. And Heaven was seen as presiding over a pantheon of deities who served to reward the good and punish the bad according to Heaven’s directives.⁹ They were not, in other words, capricious, and humans were not needing to transform them through sacrifice into a supportive pantheon.¹⁰ Among the directives that Heaven sent down was a call for humans to create a similar hierarchy in human society, in which those who follow Heaven’s dictates would be promoted and those who do not would be punished. Heaven accordingly also created rulers and political institutions for humanity.¹¹

The Mohist claims that Heaven created the cosmos and political institutions to help humanity, and oversaw a pantheon of moral, non-capricious deities, interestingly enough gained very few supporters for the next half millennium. Some of the Mohist ideas concerning things like the promotion of the worthy and the importance of frugality were to gain some support, but the idea that Heaven was the guiding force in creating the world and directing humanity had almost no resonance in the ensuing Warring States, Qin, and Western Han. On the contrary,

⁹ Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2001), pp. 51–56.

¹⁰ Puett, *To Become a God*, pp. 101–4. ¹¹ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, pp. 51–56.

the views that became dominant during this period held that human sages were the creators of culture, as well as the creators of the sacrifices needed to transform capricious divinities or of the techniques enabling humans to divinize themselves. Many argued that the sages created by following patterns found in Heaven, but few argued that Heaven actually created things for humanity on its own. Indeed, those figures who argued that Heaven actively intervened in human affairs tended to do so in order to stress the capriciousness of Heaven, not the clear morality of Heaven.

This changed dramatically, however, beginning during the political turmoil that produced the Eastern Han and continuing for several centuries. Millenarian movements emerged that proclaimed themselves to be followers of revelations handed down by a higher deity – a deity who is moral and non-capricious, and who therefore does not need to be transformed by human sacrifices in order to act on behalf of humanity. Indeed, these movements were explicitly opposed to the practice of sacrifice altogether. These same movements also began endorsing the practice of spirit visualization.

MILLENARIAN THEOLOGIES IN CHINESE LATE ANTIQUITY

The millenarian movements just mentioned came about as the Han state weakened over the course of the second century of the common era. The one about which we know most is the Celestial Masters 天師道, one of the main early texts of which we turn to momentarily.¹² In many ways, the theology and even social world of the early Celestial Masters was very close to the Mohists. The Celestial Masters held that there was a high deity who was moral and fully non-capricious and who handed down teachings for humanity. Moreover, this high deity also called upon humans to create a social hierarchy in which those who followed the admonitions properly would be promoted. Unlike the Mohists, the Celestial Masters called this high deity the One — (also called the Way 道), and it was explicitly seen as being higher than Heaven. Occasionally, this high deity would take on human form and, under the name of Laozi 老子, give revelations to humans.¹³

¹² For excellent discussions of the Celestial Masters, see Ōfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾, *Shoki no Dōkyō* 初期の道教 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1991); Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997), pp. 53–77; Terry Kleeman, *Great Perfection: Religion and Ethnicity in a Chinese Millennial Kingdom* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 1998); and idem, “Daoism in the Third Century.”

¹³ On Laozi as a god, see Anna Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoisme des Han* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1992); Livia Kohn, *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1998).

Although in many ways very close to the Mohists, the fact that the high god is the One is a clue already of a significant difference. As seen above, the One was posited, both in the self-divinization literature and in Han Wudi's sacrificial system, as being higher than the other divine powers, including Heaven.¹⁴ It was also associated in both the self-divinization literature and Han Wudi's sacrificial system with techniques that allowed humans to divinize themselves and, by becoming closer to the One, ultimately gain powers over the lesser divinities. That was true in the Celestial Masters as well. Indeed, many of these techniques would be appropriated, albeit in a very different form, by the Celestial Masters.¹⁵

But here the direction is reversed: these are not techniques created by humans to allow them to gain more powers vis-à-vis the divine. On the contrary, it is the higher god, the Way, who reveals these practices. Moreover, the Way does so because nourishing the spirits helps the cosmos – in other words, helps the Way. And, finally, the Way is explicitly opposed to sacrifice – the primary practice used by humans to control and transform divine powers.

The Celestial Masters thus appropriated elements of divinization associated with practices surrounding the One from the Warring States and Han periods. However, by reading the One as a high god and treating these practices as having been handed down by this god, the Celestial Masters shift the nature and goals of the practices dramatically.

To explore this further, let us turn to the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*, a text either written in, or at least appropriated by, the Celestial Masters.¹⁶

¹⁴ One of our earliest references to the Great One is the “Taiyi shengshui” (“The Great One Generates Water”), a text excavated from the Guodian tomb, sealed around 300 BC; see Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams, eds., *The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and The Institute of East Asian Studies, U. of California, 2000), pp. 162–70, 228–31. Although not a creator deity in the text, the Great One is seen as that which gives birth to the rest of the cosmos, including Heaven and Earth. See Puett, *To Become a God*, pp. 160–65. Over the next several centuries, appeals were made to the One or Great One as that which is more powerful than the classical pantheon of gods and goddesses. As we have already seen, this One or Great One could be posited as a cosmological force or as the highest deity – or as some combination of both. But the key is that it was something more powerful and more primordial than Heaven, Earth, and the rest of the gods and goddesses.

¹⁵ Michael Puett, “Forming Spirits for the Way: The Cosmology of the *Xiang'er* Commentary to the *Laozi*,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32 (2004), pp. 1–27.

¹⁶ The *Xiang'er* commentary was discovered in Dunhuang (S 6825), and consists of commentary to chapters three through thirty-seven of the *Laozi*. The Celestial Masters attributed it to Zhang Lu, the grandson of the Zhang Daoling, the figure who received revelations from the god Laozi.

THE *XIANG'ER* COMMENTARY TO THE *LAOZI*

The *Xiang'er* commentary reads the text of the *Laozi* as a divine revelation.¹⁷ It was revealed by the Way, the highest deity, who also hands down admonitions for humans to follow. When humans do so, they are rewarded, since the Way rules over a moral cosmos that rewards the good and punishes the bad. This is illustrated well in the commentary's somewhat counterintuitive reading of chapter five of the *Laozi*:¹⁸

“Heaven and Earth are inhumane. They take the myriad things as straw dogs.”

Heaven and Earth model themselves on the Way. They are humane to those who do good, and inhumane to those who do bad. Therefore, when they bring to an end the badness of the myriad things, they do not love them but see them as grass and as dogs.¹⁹

Heaven and Earth are deities below the Way that serve to reward and punish humans. And humans are called upon to create a social hierarchy that operates in the same manner as the moral cosmos of the Way:

“The sage is not humane, but treat the hundred families as if they were straw dogs.”

The sage patterns himself on Heaven and Earth. He is humane to the good and inhumane to the bad. When it comes to the ruler correcting and bringing the bad to an end, he also sees them as if they were straw dogs. This is why when the people accumulate good merit, their essence and spirit communicate with the Way. If there are those who wish to attack and injure one, Heaven will then save one. The common people are all just followers of straw

¹⁷ For excellent studies of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* 老子想爾注校箋 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1991); Ōfuchi, *Shoki no Dōkyō*; Bokenkamp, “Traces of Early Celestial Master Physiological Practice”; idem, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, pp. 29–77; and William G. Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu in Light of the Ma-wang-tui Silk Manuscripts,” *BSOAS* 45 (1982), pp. 95–117. For a discussion of the cosmology of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Puett, “Forming Spirits for the Way.”

¹⁸ My translations of the *Xiang'er* commentary, here and throughout this paper, have been aided tremendously by the superb translation given by Stephen Bokenkamp in his *Early Daoist Scriptures*, pp. 78–148. I have also learned enormously from Rao Zongyi's *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* and Boltz's, “Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu.”

¹⁹ *Xiang'er*, as found in in the photographic copy of the manuscript in Ōfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾, *Tonkō Dōkyō: Zurokuhen* 敦煌道經, 圖錄編 (Tokyo: Fukutake, 1979; hereafter, *XE*), pp. 421–34, lines 31–34. My article uses the line numbers given in this edition, as expressed by the numbers following “*XE*”.

dogs. Their essences and spirits are unable to communicate with Heaven.²⁰

In short, *Xiang'er* reads the ideas in *Laozi* as being very much like those of the Mohists: the Way, like Heaven for the Mohists, rules over a moral cosmos and directs humans to create a social world modeled on the moral hierarchy of the high deity.

As such, the *Xiang'er* commentary is explicitly opposed to the practice of sacrifice.

“I say: As for the practice of [eating] leftover food and libations, these are the things that we detest.”

Those who practice the Way live; those who lose the Way die. The correct method of Heaven does not reside in sacrificing and offering. The Way therefore forbids sacrifices and offerings, and for them has heavy penalties. Sacrifice is communication with the demonic. Therefore, if there are leftover foods, implements, or remains [from the sacrifices], the people of the Way will never drink, eat, or use them.²¹

The logic of *Xiang'er* accepts that sacrifice involves communion with ghosts, but it strictly forbids the practice. Tellingly, the commentary also strictly forbids the eating of leftovers. But note the thrust of the argument: *Xiang'er* is assuming that most people are continuing to sacrifice. The argument here is simply that those who practice the Way should not practice the sacrifices nor partake of the leftovers. On the contrary, they should attempt to follow the Way, which is, among other things, *ziran* 自然. I follow Stephen Bokenkamp in translating *ziran* as “self-sufficiency”:

“Rarely speaking is being self-sufficient (*ziran*).”

Self-sufficiency is the Way. It enjoys clarity and stillness. If one speaks rarely, one enters into clarity and stillness. If one combines this with self-sufficiency, one can live long.²²

The Way is self-sufficient. If the adept is as well, as we shall see, he will be removed from the network of lineage ties (including the constructed lineage ties created through sacrifice) that otherwise binds all humans and those ghosts who have been made into ancestors. As such he will be long-lived.

Precisely what does this mean? It means that the adept’s body should be able to generate itself, as opposed to being dependent on others:

²⁰ XE: 34-37.

²¹ XE: 373-76.

²² XE: 357-58.

The body should constantly generate itself and take calming the essences and spirits as its basis. It should not depend on others but instead support itself continuously.²³

The body must generate itself, and this requires calming the essences and spirits.

The point is repeated throughout the commentary:

Humans should only preserve their bodies; they should not love their bodies. What does this mean? If you maintain the admonitions of the Way, you accumulate goodness and complete accomplishments; accumulate essences and complete 成 spirits. When spirits are completed, the transcendents live long. Consider them [the spirits] the treasures of the body.²⁴

The adept must follow the admonitions of the Way, accumulate essences, and complete spirits. The full physiology here is that humans have spirits within them, and, by accumulating essences, they can bring these spirits to completion. Those who so do will become transcendents and live long.

To explicate the argument in full, let us read through a portion of the commentary sequentially, beginning with chapter six, as this section forms a linked argument.

Chapter six of the *Laozi*, contains the famous reference to the spirit of the valley, which I translate according to later readings:

“The spirit of the valley does not die. This is called the dark female.”

The *Xiang'er* commentary characteristically offers a different interpretation, in this case via a rereading of one of the characters:

“Valley” 谷 is “desire” 欲.²⁵

Through character substitution, the commentary thus reads the *Laozi* line as “Desiring the spirits not to die is called the dark female.” This allows the commentator to develop his argument about preventing the spirits from dying:

Essence is congealed to become spirits. If you desire to command the spirits not to die, you should congeal the essences and hold fast to them. The female is the earth. Form and nature are stable; women model themselves on this. They are therefore not firm. If a man desires to congeal essences, his mind should be modeled on the earth and imitate females. Do not act such that affairs are initiated.²⁶

²³ XE: 456-57.

²⁴ XE: 161-63.

²⁵ XE: 50.

²⁶ XE: 50-53.

When essences are congealed, they become spirits. If one wants to keep the spirits within one's body from dying, one must congeal one's own essences and hold fast to them. The text associates the ability to do this with females. Thus, males are called upon to model themselves on females, and not to initiate affairs.

This valuation of the female – certainly common to virtually all readings of the *Laozi* – is taken in a distinctive direction by the *Xiang'er* commentary:

“The gate of the mysterious female is the root of Heaven and Earth.”²⁷

The female is the earth; women model themselves upon it. The hole of yin (that is, the vagina) is the gate, the organ of life and death. It is the most essential, and is therefore named the “root.” The male member is also named the “root.”²⁸

The female attributes are granted priority. But the text immediately reads the passage in question in terms of sexual physiology, and also underlines that both male and female sexual organs count as this “root” of life and death. The text then elaborates:

“Soft so as to exist.”

The Way of yin and yang, is thereby like congealing essences to make life. By the year when one comes to know the mandate (namely, age fifty), one should meet one's duty and then stop oneself. When one is young in years, even though one possesses it, one should limit it and be sparing. “Soft” refers to infrequency. If one follows this infrequency and restriction from one's youth, one will endure a long time.²⁹

Sexual reproduction is a process of yin and yang meeting such that essences are congealed to make life. The text clearly thinks this must be done, but one should do so only infrequently. The sense would appear to be (and this will be confirmed soon) that using one's essence for sexual reproduction also means a loss of one's essence and thus a loss of one's ability to generate spirits.

Sexual reproduction is thus necessary for the continuation of the human species, but also a great loss in terms of the more important goal of completing spirits:

Now this [copulating to reproduce] produces great calamities. Why did the Way create 造 it? The Way values ancestral sacrifices and values that the species does not end. It desires that humans join

²⁷ XE: 53.

²⁸ XE: 53–54.

²⁹ XE: 55–57.

their essences and generate life; therefore [the Way] teaches that when one is young one should be infrequent and sparing but not stop [copulating to reproduce]. It does not teach them to exert effort. The ideas of exerting effort emerged from the minds of fools. How could one blame the Way? Humans with utmost power have a strong will and are able to not unite and produce life. From a young age they stop this [the losing of their essences through copulation] and they are able to complete good spirits earlier. One calls these essences of the Way. Thus, it [the Way] commands Heaven and Earth to have no sacrifices, dragons no offspring, transcendents no wives, the Jade Maiden no husband. They are of great trustworthiness.³⁰

Using one's essences for sexual reproduction means that one loses the essences that one could otherwise use for completing spirits. Essences used properly in this way are essences of the Way. The highest beings – Heaven, Earth, dragons, transcendents, and the Jade Maiden – use their essences in this way, and thus do not mate, reproduce, have offspring, and need ancestral offerings. Humans, not being at this level, do need to reproduce, and thus the Way created a world in which humans, in order to continue, must mate. But most then waste their essences, die accordingly, and become recipients of ancestral sacrifices. Ancestral sacrifices were thus not created by humans to control divine powers but are rather valued by the Way itself. But such practices are a lesser way for humans to use essence.

The exception are those few humans who themselves become transcendents:

“Undertake this and do not exert effort in it.”

If one can undertake this Way, one can accord and obtain transcendent longevity. As for the affairs of men and women, one should not exert effort in them.³¹

The *Laozi* line in question is usually read as a statement of the importance of acting without overt effort. The *Xiang'er* commentary instead reads it as saying that one should undertake the teachings handed down by the Way, and should therefore avoid exertion in sexual intercourse. If one does so follow the Way, one can become a transcendent. Thus, those humans who hope to achieve transcendence must avoid wasting their essence through intercourse. As such they would become like Heaven and Earth. Hence the *Xiang'er* reading of the following *Laozi* line:

³⁰ *XE*: 57–63.

³¹ *XE*: 63–64.

“Heaven endures and Earth lives long; the reason that Heaven and Earth are able to endure and live long is that they do not themselves give birth. Therefore, they are able to endure and live long.”³²

They are able to model themselves on the Way, and are therefore able to generate themselves and endure and live long.³³

Not concerned with giving birth to others, Heaven and Earth are able to live long.

In contrast, those who do not follow the Way lose their essence and ultimately lose their lives. Indeed, they are called “corpses.” I will first quote the ensuing line of *Laozi* as it appears in other editions, including both the Mawangdui and Wang Bi editions:

“Being without self, he is therefore able to complete his self.”

The *Xiang'er* commentary first gives a reading that takes “*si* 私” as “*shi* 尸” (“corpses”), and then comments accordingly:

“Being without a corpse, he is therefore able to complete his corpse.”

The bodies of those who do not understand the Way of long life are all just corpses that move. It is not the Way that moves them; it is entirely the motion of corpses. The reason that people of the Way are able to obtain the long life of transcedents is that they do not move the movement of corpses. They are different from the vulgar. Thus, they are able to complete their corpse and command themselves to become transcendent nobles.³⁴

The world of sexual reproduction and ancestral sacrifice is also one of death, and those humans who live their lives this way are corpses. In contrast, those who follow the precepts of the Way do not follow the path of corpses but instead bring their vulgar bodies to completion and become transcedents.

We will skip a few lines and pick up with the *Xiang'er* commentary to chapter 9 of the *Laozi*:

“Upholding it and filling it is not as good as stopping. Regulating and yet taking pleasure in it, one cannot treasure it for a long time.”

The Way teaches people to congeal essence and complete spir-its. Now, the age is filled with fake specialists who falsely expound on the Way, referring to the texts of Huangdi, Xuannü 玄女, Gongzi 龔子, and Rongcheng 容成. They teach their followers

³² *Laozi* 7.

³³ *XE*: 65–66.

³⁴ *XE*: 71–74.

not to spread [their essence] (semen) in intercourse with women, but through meditation to return the essence to supplement the brain. But their mind and spirit are not united, and they lose that to which they hold fast. Acting to regulate their pleasures, they cannot treasure it for long. *Ruo* 若 is *ru* 如. “Not as good as 不如” refers to [not as good as] self-sufficiently being so.³⁵

The Way teaches humans not to waste their essence in intercourse but rather to concentrate the essence and complete spirits with it.

The commentary then develops the full argument in a lengthy commentary to chapter 10 of the *Laozi*:

“If you carry and orient 營 the *po*-soul and preserve the One, you are capable of preventing them from separating.”³⁶

The *po*-soul is white 魄白也. Thus, essence is white – the same color as the origin.³⁷

The *Xiang'er* commentary is not particularly interested in the *po*-soul. But, by their common color of white, the commentary connects the *Laozi* line to essence, which is a key concern for the commentator. The color of whiteness also allows the commentary to link essence with the origin, and this will allow the commentary to read the *Laozi* reference to the One in a crucial way.

The commentary continues:

The body is the vehicle of the essence. Since the essence can leave you, you should carry and orient it. When spirits are completed and the *qi* comes, they carry and orient the body.³⁸

The proper use of the body is as a vehicle for essence. Given the substitution already made, the commentary thus reads the first sentence of the *Laozi* line as calling on practitioners to use their bodies to carry and orient the essence.

The commentary turns next to the One:

If you wish to bring this task to completion, do not depart from the One. The One is the Way. Where does it reside in a person’s body? How does one hold fast to it? The One does not reside in the human body. All those who depend upon the body fill the world with endless false arts. This is not the true Way. The One exists outside Heaven and Earth. When it enters between Heaven and Earth, it comes and goes in the human body. It moves everywhere within your skin; it does not rest in one place. The One disperses

³⁵ *XE*: 85–90.

³⁶ *Laozi* 10.

³⁷ *XE*: 102–3.

³⁸ *XE*: 103–4.

its form as *qi* and collects its form as the Taishang Laojun (Laozi), who rules Kun Lun. It is sometimes called emptiness and nothingness; it is sometimes called self-sufficiency; it is sometimes called the nameless; all are the same.³⁹

The One is the same as the Way. It exists outside of the world of bodies – at the cosmic level, it is outside Heaven and Earth, and at the level of humans it is outside the human body. The One then disperses itself as energies throughout the cosmos and throughout human bodies. It can also, during periods of great need, collect itself again as Laozi, who gives revelation to humans – the text of the *Laozi* being one such revelation.

The commentary contrasts this view with false arts, a contrast that the commentary continues to underscore:

Now we have spread the precepts of the Way, teaching humans that if they hold fast to the precepts and do not violate them, in their actions they will hold fast to the One. If they do not practice the precepts, in their actions they will lose the One. The world is filled with endless false arts that point toward the five viscera and call them the One. They close their eyes and meditate, desiring that their followers seek fortune. This is false. They just remove themselves more and more from life.⁴⁰

The One, in the form of Laozi, has given humans precepts for how to act. If they follow these, they will be holding fast to the One. In contrast, the false arts locate the One in the human body, in the form of the five viscera, and thus teach their followers to meditate on this One within them. As such, according to the commentary, they simply become more like corpses, removing themselves from the life of the Way.

The overall argument of the *Xiang'er* commentary is thus becoming clear. All humans on earth are defined as corpses. But the Way has placed the essence (*jing*) within all of these corpses. The normative goal of the corpses is thus to congeal this essence to form spirits. But most of the corpses instead copulate and use the essence to produce more corpses. The Way does in fact support this copulation, for the Way continues to need more corpses for the production of more spirits. But, as more corpses fail to use their essence in this needed way, the deviant practices continue, and the cosmos falls progressively into greater danger.

³⁹ *XE*: 103–10.

⁴⁰ *XE*: 110–13.

As in the sacrifice chapter of *Liji*, corpses (living humans who become receptacles for spirits) are used to nourish spirits. But here the goal is not the creation of a hierarchical cosmos linked through chains of patterned filiality. Or, rather, all of that does go on, and was in fact created by the Way. But the *Xiang'er* claim is that a certain group of people are and in fact must be outside of this world of ritual. For the *Xiang'er*, these are the people who will form spirits for the Way, who will themselves become refined and become as long-lived as Heaven and Earth – avoiding sacrifice and thus remaining fully autonomous from the constructed world of sacrifices, ancestors, and lineages.

In other words, using essence to copulate and produce babies is necessary for the preservation of the human species. But the highest goal is to instead keep the essence within oneself and use it to bring spirits to completion. In practice, the teachings thus result in a society in which the majority of humans are copulating, forming families, and performing ancestral sacrifices. But those few who truly follow the teachings will be self-sufficient and will become transcendents.

Thus, the *Xiang'er* commentary builds upon self-divinization practices, but within a cosmology very reminiscent of the earlier Mohist communities, in which a high divinity (in *Xiang'er* the Way, for Mohists – Heaven) created the cosmos and continues to organize the spirits of the cosmos to reward the good and punish the bad. Like the Mohists, then, *Xiang'er* is positing a moral cosmos governed by a moral deity. Unlike the Mohists, however, the moral deity needs humans in order to preserve the cosmos. Humans thus become functionaries for the Way.

To gain a fuller understanding of the implications of these arguments, we now turn to two other texts from this same time-period that are working within a similar paradigm of appropriating self-divinization techniques within claims of divine revelation from the high deity Laozi. We will turn first to *Laozi zhongjing*.

LAOZI ZHONGJING

Laozi zhongjing 老子中經 describes the spirits that exist in the human body, explains how to visualize them, and details the implications of doing so.⁴¹ Like the *Xiang'er* commentary, it is a text that belongs

⁴¹ My understanding of *Laozi zhongjing* has been helped immeasurably by the following works: Kristofer M. Schipper, “Le Calendrier de Jade – Note sur le *Laozi zhongjing*,” *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 125 (1979), pp. 75–80; idem, “The Inner World of the *Lao-tzu chung-ching*,” in E. Zürcher, ed., *Time and Space in Chinese Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 114–31; John Lagerwey, “Deux écrits taoïstes anciens,” *CEA* (2004) 14, pp. 139–71; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*; idem, “Early Daoist Meditation”; and Gil Raz, “Imperial Efficacy.”

to the period of China's early middle ages – the late-second to third centuries.⁴² It is presented as the words of Laozi. As the author states in the concluding section:⁴³

I at the appropriate times have myself recorded and circulated these three chapters: the upper, lower, and central classics.⁴⁴

As Schipper points out, the *Daodejing* was referred to in the Han as the upper and lower chapters. Moreover, he observes, the reference to the upper and lower chapters before the central one is telling:

The order of the enumeration precludes that these are three parts of the same work, as in that case we would have had the familiar *shang, chung, hsia* [upper, middle, lower] sequence. We should thus understand that the text means a *shang-p'ien* and a *hsia-p'ien* came first and then a *chung-p'ien* or a *chung-ching*... What is meant here must be that Lao Tzu first “testified” by revealing the *Tao-te ching* and that the present *Chung-ching* is a sequel.⁴⁵

Laozi zhongjing is thus a supplement to the *Laozi*. The text presents itself as the central scripture, coming in between the upper and lower portions of the *Laozi* but written (or at least revealed for circulation) later. Unlike *Xiang'er*, which presents itself as a human commentary to the divinely-revealed text of the *Laozi*, *Laozi zhongjing* presents instead as a further revelation from Laozi, who is now bringing to completion the *Daode jing*.

The text presents the background for this revelation, namely, a coming apocalypse. Only the true persons, transcendents, and persons of the Way will survive.⁴⁶ The text begins by explicating the series of deities that exist within both the cosmos and the human body:

The Highest Great One is the father of the Way, [existing] prior to Heaven and Earth. He resides above the nine heavens, in the midst of Great Purity, outside the eight profundities, within the minute subtlety. I do not know his name. Primal *qi* is all he is.⁴⁷

At the head of the pantheon is the Highest Great One, composed of primal *qi* and existing prior to Heaven and Earth.

⁴² For discussions of the dating of the text, see Schipper, “Inner World of the *Lao-tzu chung-ching*,” pp. 118–19; and Lagerwey, “Deux écrits taoïstes anciens.”

⁴³ Here and throughout, my translations of *Laozi zhongjing* have been greatly helped by those given in the studies mentioned above.

⁴⁴ *Laozi zhongjing*, chapter 55, *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Beijing: Shumu wenxian, 1992; hereafter, *LZZJ*), 19.21.

⁴⁵ Schipper, “Inner World of the *Lao-tzu chung-ching*,” p. 117.

⁴⁶ *LZZJ*, chap. 52, 19.17.

⁴⁷ *LZZJ*, chap. 1, 18.1.

The text goes on to describe how the Highest Great One is manifested:

As for his spirit, he has a human head and the body of a bird. He is shaped like a rooster. The five colors of the phoenix. Pearled clothing and dark yellow. He resides above your head, nine feet from your body, always within the violet clouds, below the flowery canopy. When you see him, say to him: “Highest Great One, Lord of the Way, your great grandson, your small Wang Jia 王甲, in pureness of intent, is fond of the Way and wishes to achieve long life.”⁴⁸

Although his name is not known, he can still be visualized and beseeched to help the adept achieve long life.

We are next introduced to another figure:

The limitless, highest, original lord, is the Lord of the Way. He has a single body with nine heads, and sometimes transforms into nine men, all of whom wear robes with pearls of five colors and caps of nine virtues. He is the son of the Highest Great One, but is not his son; he emerged spontaneously of primal *qi*, and that is all.⁴⁹

This next figure, the Lord of the Way, is thus the son of the Highest Great One. But, crucially, the Lord of the Way arose by spontaneous emergence, rather than copulation.

Like *Xiang'er*, *Laozi zhongjing* is trying to remove the adept from the lineage networks that usually control humans. But, unlike *Xiang'er*, *Laozi zhongjing* is doing so by positing another genealogical line descending down from the Highest Great One.

The description of the Lord of the Way continues:

He resides precisely on your head, on purple clouds, below the flowery canopy. When you see him, say, “August heavenly lord on high, highest lord of the Way, your great grandson, your small Wang Jia, am fond of the Way and wish to obtain long life. Nourish me, raise me; preserve me, protect me. Poisonous insects and wild beasts will all prostrate when they see me. Command that I will complete all that I do, and will obtain all that I seek.” In the county of Highest Clarity, the town of Empty Vacuity, surnamed Vermilion Ignorance, named Brightness, and styled Thearch Village, he resides as a star in the Hooked Array of Great Subtlety. He is called the Heavenly August Great Thearch, Preserver of the Dazzling Po. Constantly remember it; do not forget it. Humans

⁴⁸ *LZZJ*, chap. 1, 18.1.

⁴⁹ *LZZJ*, chap. 2, 18.1.

also have it. Constantly visualize it between your eyebrows and connect it with the Mud Pellet,⁵⁰ and your *qi* will rise with the revolutions of the heavens.⁵¹

The text is thus laying out a pantheon of deities, descended from the Highest Great One. But the descent is through emanations of *qi*, rather than through sexual reproduction. Moreover, these deities exist not only in the cosmos but also within humans as well. By visualizing them, one can keep them in place and make requests of them. As in this example, the requests take the form of calls for long life and protection from dangerous elements.

Like the *Xiang'er* commentary, *Laozi zhongjing* is claiming that humans have spirits within themselves. But it takes this argument several steps further, claiming that this spirit world is not only hierarchically organized along Mohist lines but it is in fact genealogically connected as well. But the genealogical connection is one of spontaneous emergence, rather than copulation (or sacrificial construction).

Perhaps the most significant figure in this pantheon is Laozi himself: I am the child of the Way. Humans also have this; it is not only me. He resides precisely in the great storehouse ducts of the stomach, facing south, sitting on a bed of pearls and jade, with a flowery canopy of yellow clouds covering him. He wears robes of five-pieced pearls. His mother resides above, to his right, preserving and nurturing him. His father resides above, to his left, teaching and protecting him.⁵²

Laozi is the child of the Way, but humans also have this child of the Way (that is, Laozi) within themselves.

Laozi then describes his own genealogical relationships:

Therefore the father is called High Yang, and his style name is Master Yang. The mother is called Great Yin, and her style name is Dark Radiant Jade Woman. One's [or, my] (that is, Laozi's) body is the Primordial Yang, its style name is Child Cinnabar (*Zi Dan*). The True Man is style-named *Zhong Huang*; he is the master of the True Me. He constantly teaches me the way of divine transcendence and long life. He constantly serves me to the left and right, resting in the Great Storehouse. He lodges in the spleen, together with Master Yellow Robe (*Huang Shanzi*). He guards me, and gives to the spirits what they need to obtain.⁵³

⁵⁰ In section eight of the text, the Mud Pellet is identified as a deity in the brain.

⁵¹ *LZZJ*, chap. 2, 18.1-2. ⁵² *LZZJ*, chap. 12, 18.7-8. ⁵³ *LZZJ*, chap. 12, 18.8.

Laozi explains that he exists in humans as a child of primordial Yang, with High Yang and Great Yin as his father and mother respectively. He is called “Child Cinnabar.” The adept is thus called upon to visualize this figure:

Therefore constantly think of the True Man Child Cinnabar precisely in the great storehouse ducts of the stomach, facing south, eating yellow essence and red *qi*, and drinking and partaking of the Spring of Sweet Wine.⁵⁴

After visualizing him, the adept should then think of Child Cinnabar as being the same size as himself:

Primordial Yang Child Cinnabar is nine-tenths of an inch long. Think of him and make him become the equal size of your body. When the father and mother nourish him, you thereupon attain divine transcendence.⁵⁵

The adept can thus obtain divine transcendence.

The adept thus in a sense becomes Laozi. He visualizes the child of the Way as the equal size of his own body, and is nourished only by yellow essence and red *qi*. The latter, moreover, are delivered by the Father and Mother – High Yang and Great Yin – a genealogical relationship based entirely outside of the domesticated relationships of humans in the world of death. In both sustenance and genealogy, the adept thus becomes linked to the emergence of primal *qi*, instead of being tied to the domesticated networks of humans.

However, the text does not stop at simply calling for the adept to remove himself from these networks. On the contrary, the adept is called upon to incorporate the other gods into these relationships of *qi* and essence, instead of the relationships of domesticated human sacrifice. Unlike *Xiang'er*, then, in which the adept is called upon to stop sacrificing, *Laozi zhongjing* calls upon the adept to continue doing so:

Constantly by means of the four seasons, sacrifice to my ancestors. In the first month, on a *hai* day, when the cock crows, sacrifice in the suburbs (*jiao*) and at the ancestral temple. In the second month, on a *hai* day, sacrifice to the earth altar (*she*), [Hou] Ji, Feng Bo, and Yushi.⁵⁶

But these sacrifices are all done internally to the body, and are thus performed utilizing the *qi* of the human body:

The suburb (*jiao*) is on the head, at the opening to the brain. The ancestral temple on the top portion of the backbone. The earth

⁵⁴ *LZZJ*, chap. 12, 18.8. ⁵⁵ *LZZJ*, chap. 12, 18.8. ⁵⁶ *LZZJ*, chap. 12, 18.8.

altar (*she*) is on the left end of the spleen. The altar to [Hou] Ji is at the extremity of the great intestines.⁵⁷

Instead of opposing sacrifice for the adepts, as in *Xiang'er*, in *Laozi zhongjing* we get a separate genealogical line based on emergence from *qi*. These figures also exist in the human body, and the adept then brings ghosts from the sacrificial cult into this new lineage as well. Thus, instead of transforming the ghosts into a constructed sacrificial lineage, as in the world of classical sacrifice, the adept here refines the ghosts and brings them into this other lineage based upon emanations of *qi*. The consequence of this is that even the major figures of the sacrificial cult are thus brought into this network based upon emanations of *qi*.

In many ways, such an argument is comparable to that of the *Xiang'er* commentary. Both the texts are discussing practices seen as having been revealed by the god Laozi – in the case of *Xiang'er* the claim is made as a commentary to the revealed text of the *Laozi*, while *Laozi zhongjing* claims to be a further revelation of the text of the *Laozi*. Both texts also posit a cosmology structured by a pantheon of higher deities, centered or directed by Laozi and removed from the ghosts of sacrificial practice. Laozi is then seen as offering divine revelations for humans to follow. These divine revelations call upon the adept to nourish spirits. Although the forms of nourishment differ – completing spirits in the case of *Xiang'er*, visualization of the spirits in the case of *Laozi zhongjing* – both involve attempts to use the energies and essence in the practitioner's body to work with the spirits. In both cases, the result is that the adept will become a transcendent, achieving long life and transcending the world of human sacrifice.

But the differences are telling as well. For *Xiang'er*, the pantheon of higher deities is defined very much along Mohist lines: a hierarchy of divinities that reward the good and punish the bad. Moreover, again like the Mohists, the commentary clearly calls for a social hierarchy to be created in which those who successfully follow the precepts of the Way would be promoted and those who do not would be punished. A social hierarchy, in other words, that would parallel the cosmic hierarchy above.

Both the cosmology and the social world it is calling for are clearly very structured. If the text was not written within the Celestial Masters, it is easy to see at least why a hierarchical community like the Celestial Masters would appropriate it and attribute it to their founder: the key

⁵⁷ *LZZJ*, chap. 12, 18.8.

for the text is for humans to submit themselves to the admonitions of the high god Laozi, as properly explicated by the commentary.

Relatedly, the “One” in the *Xiang'er* commentary is explicitly defined as being outside of the human body. And Laozi is thus by definition outside the human body as well: Laozi is the One, and it simply takes on human form as Laozi to give revelations to humanity. Laozi never locates himself in the human body. Accordingly, the cosmology of the *Xiang'er* consists of the One sending energies through the cosmos, and humans are called upon to use their bodies to utilize these energies to complete spirits.

There is an implicit macrocosmic/microcosmic set of correlations in *Xiang'er*, in which the adept is completing spirits in his body as the Way is doing so in the cosmos at large. But the text clearly draws a limit to these parallels by emphasizing strongly that the Way is not in the human body.

The *Laozi zhongjing* cosmology differs on these points. This work posits a very explicit set of macrocosmic/microcosmic parallels between the spirits in the cosmos and those in the human body, and these parallels significantly include Laozi himself. The implications of following the practices revealed by Laozi thus become more radical.

In the case of *Xiang'er*, following the admonitions of the Way results in the adept becoming self-sufficient, long-lived, and removed from the lineage and sacrificial constructions of other humans. For that of *Laozi zhongjing*, the adept becomes like Laozi himself. In contrast to the *Xiang'er* commentary, the Laozi of *Laozi zhongjing* claims that he exists in the body of the adept as well: he exists as a child, and the adept is called upon to visualize him as being the same size as his own body. The adept thus becomes like Laozi, nourishing spirits within himself and refining the spirits and ghosts that are the objects of human sacrificial practice as well.

HUANGTING JING

The final text to which we turn is *Huangting jing* (outer version, otherwise called the 太上黃庭外景玉經), a meditation text from the third or fourth century of the common era.⁵⁸ Like the *Xiang'er* commentary

⁵⁸ *Huangting jing* exists in two different forms, an outer version and an inner version. The latter is much longer than the former; it also includes all of the former and elaborates upon it. Schipper has argued persuasively that the outer version is the earlier one, while the inner version represents a later interpretation of the outer one. See Schipper, *Concordance du*

and *Laozi zhongjing*, *Huangting jing* claims the practices it advocates to be divine revelation by the god Laozi.⁵⁹ Also like *Laozi zhongjing*, the text claims that it itself is such a revelation. At the very opening, the text frames itself as a creation of the divine Laozi:⁶⁰

Laojun, residing alone, created 𠄎 the seven word [verses] to explain the bodily form and the various spirits.⁶¹

The text is thus a revelation from Laozi explicating the spirits that exist in the human body.

The ensuing description begins by explaining the layout of the human body:

Above, there is the Yellow Court, below is the Pass Primordially,
Behind there are the Dark Towers, in front there is the Gate of
Destiny.⁶²

Unlike in *Laozi zhongjing*, the descriptions in *Huangting jing* do not specify precisely where each of the places can be found in the physical human body. The work rather describes the system relationally: the Yellow Court is above, the Pass Primordially is below, etc. Thus, each place is only defined in relation to the others.

The various commentaries to *Huangting jing* do try to match the places described with particular places in the human body and to define which spirits are being described. But they disagree amongst themselves. It may be, therefore, that the text is not asking the adept to find a one-to-one correspondence between the places described and particular locations in the physical human body. The adept is rather being asked to think about the places described relationally.

A similar point can be made about the spirits in the body. As in *Laozi zhongjing*, *Huangting jing* describes the spirits in each place, but unlike *Laozi zhongjing*, it does not explicate the pantheon of these spirits,

Houang-t'ing King: Nei-king et Wai-king (Paris: Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1975).

⁵⁹ My understanding of the *Huangting jing* has been helped greatly by the following works: Schipper, *Concordance du Houang-t'ing King: Nei-king et Wai-king*; idem, *Taoist Body*; Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*; Robinet, *Taoist Meditation*; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*; idem, "Early Daoist Meditation."

⁶⁰ Here and throughout, I have benefitted greatly from the translations given in Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*; Schipper, *Taoist Body*; Robinet, *Taoist Meditation*; and Pregadio, *Great Clarity*; Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 181–88.

⁶¹ *Huangting jing*, in *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Beijing: Shumu wenxian, 1992; hereafter, *HTJ*) 12, pp. 28–29.

⁶² *HTJ* 12, p. 29.

and often does not even name them.⁶³ One significant exception to this lack of identification of the spirits in the body is Laozi himself:

The Ming Tang proceeds in four directions, taking as its model
the primordial sea;
The True Man Cinnabar Child is precisely me, in front.⁶⁴

The text notes that Laozi himself exists in the form of a child within the adept, as was the claim of *Laozi zhongjing*, a work that also presented itself as a writing by Laozi. But given that, in general, *Huangting jing* does not name the spirits and does not explain a correspondence between its descriptions and the human body, how was the text supposed to be used? And what is the text arguing?

The emphasis in its opening portion concerns how the adept must breathe so that the proper energies can be moved through the body:

Inhaling and exhaling within the stove, entering the Cinnabar
Field

The pure water of the jade lake bathes the potent root.
If one is able to practice it one can exist for a long time.
In the Yellow Court there is one wearing red clothes.
The Pass Primordially is locked; closed are the two doors.
The Dark Towers on either side are distantly high.
In the Cinnabar Field the essence and *qi* (energies) are subtle.
The pure water of the jade lake rises and generates fat.
The potent root is firm; it does not decline with age.
In the central lake there is a noble man wearing crimson and
red.

Three inches below the field, a spirit resides.

When interior and exterior are separated, close them.

The interior of the shelter for the spirits must be kept in order.⁶⁵

The result is that the spirits are nourished and stay within the body. Moreover, the various spirits living within the body become linked:

Externally, provide a basis for the three yang, and they will
come of their own accord;

Internally, preserve the three spirits; you can live long.

The *hun*-souls desire to ascend to the heavens and the *po*-souls
to enter the depths.

If you make the *hun*-souls return and the *po*-souls come back,
the Way will be spontaneous (*ziran*).⁶⁶

⁶³ The inner version does name the spirits. Although this could represent an accurate portrayal of the intent of the outer version, but it also may represent a later attempt to argue for a particular pantheon – much like the later commentarial disputes over how to map the body cosmology of the text onto particular places in the physical body.

⁶⁴ *HTJ* 12, p. 34.

⁶⁵ *HTJ* 12, pp. 29–31.

⁶⁶ *HTJ* 12, pp. 42–43.

The adept thus preserves the spirits and links them together.

The implication is that when humans fail to undertake these practices, the spirits and souls tend to disburse from the body. Indeed, as the text argues, humans and transcendents are not inherently different at all from each other. The difference comes from the fact that most humans dissipate their energies and spirits, whereas the transcendents do not:

The transcendents and masters of the Way do not have anything different.

It is that their accumulated essence is brought to harmonize with their concentrated humaneness.

Humans exhaustively eat the grains and the five flavors,
While they (the transcendents and masters of the Way) only eat
the *qi* of the most harmonized yin and yang.

Therefore they are able to not die and to move together with
Heaven.⁶⁷

By feeding on *qi* rather than on domesticated grains, the transcendents do not die.⁶⁸

If humans do this, they will link the various locations and spirits through the center – the Yellow Court. When it works, the body functions as a whole, with a proper circulation of *qi* (energies) and essence connecting the various deities through the center in the Yellow Court, where Laozi himself resides.

The overall cosmology of the text is thus clear. The cosmos itself is the body of Laozi, and is also ruled from the center, where Laozi himself resides. The adept, who at the beginning has Child Cinnabar (the young Laozi) living within his body, slowly becomes like Laozi himself through this process of visualizing the spirits and linking them together through the movements of energies and essence. The human body thus becomes a microcosm of the cosmos. Laozi himself incorporates the entire cosmos, and the adept's body slowly comes to do the same at a microcosmic level.

And why should humans do this? At the very least, humans gain longer life by following these practices – they no longer dissipate the energies and spirits within themselves, and they accordingly become transcendents. In the *Xiang'er* commentary, humans seem to serve a cosmic function as well by following these revelations of Laozi: by cultivating spirits, they helped to refine the cosmos and slow down the decay that was set in precisely because of the existence of humans.

⁶⁷ *HTJ* 12, pp. 44–45.

⁶⁸ On the issues of consuming *qi* rather than domesticated grains, see the excellent discussion by Campamy in his *Making Transcendents*, pp. 62–87.

This may be true in *Huangting jing* as well, but no such larger argument is made explicitly.

Like *Laozi zhongjing*, the goal of *Huangting jing* is thus one of centering. In some ways, this is similar to the centering acts described in the sacrifice chapters of the *Liji*, in which the ruler would use sacrifice to connect the various cults and define himself as the center. And it is even more similar to the attempts in Han Wudi's sacrificial system to link the various spirits through the ruler's circulation throughout the realm, thereby divinizing himself. But here these acts are done not by sacrifice and not by traveling throughout the realm but through the circulation of energies and essence within the human body, thus connecting spirits at a higher cosmic level. And, crucially, the key for the system's working is that the cosmos is run by Laozi, who occupies the center. The adept's centering acts are thus not a human attempt to unify the disparate spirit world; it is Laozi who reveals the techniques for humans, and the adept can only succeed by becoming, at a microcosmic level, like Laozi for the cosmos as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In all three texts discussed, we have noted, despite their differences, a common set of themes. All three represent an attempt to appropriate the techniques of human self-divinization that had developed in the Warring States and Han periods, along with its *qi*-based cosmology and its assertion of the Great One as the source of everything. At least *Laozi zhongjing* and *Huangting jing* also appear to be appropriating the general vision of divinization developed in the imperial sacrificial system of Han Wudi as well, in which the emperor would circulate throughout the realm and personally sacrifice to the local spirits, thus linking them through himself and ultimately divinizing himself in the process. And this cosmology was also, of course, rooted in the Great One, in this case posted as a higher divinity than Heaven.

But, for all three texts, such practices are presented not as human attempts to gain divine powers but rather as divine revelations from the god Laozi (associated with the Great One), offering the practices as ways to save those few humans willing to undertake the practices and, to varying degrees in the three texts, to help refine the spirits and thus the full cosmos as well. Instead of humans developing practices that will allow them to divinize themselves and get closer to the Great One, it is the Great One that on the contrary gives divine revelations and practices to humans.

The implications of such an argument cannot be over-exaggerated. If one looks at religious practices in the Warring States and early Han, one of the characteristics that is striking is the degree to which those practices are human attempts to control, mollify, or transform divine figures – figures who were consistently portrayed as capricious and potentially dangerous. Sacrifice, of course, was the dominant such practice, and self-divinization techniques were a later attempt to control spirits by becoming a higher spirit oneself.

The Mohist community asserted, very much against the dominant religious practices of the day, that the divine powers were in fact non-capricious, moral, and working to help humanity. Indeed, they argued, it was in fact Heaven – a moral high god – who created the cosmos and political institutions to help humanity and who handed down teaching to guide human behavior. Heaven also presided over a hierarchy of moral divinities who would reward or punish humans according to whether humans acted properly.

But such a position, as we saw, had little impact on the religious landscape of early China. The more significant debates in the early period rested rather on the human response to a world seen as haunted and populated by capricious spirits.

It is thus crucial to emphasize the significance of the fact that all three texts under discussion strongly assert the claim that a non-capricious high god – defined as Laozi in all three – runs the cosmos and hands down revelations for humanity. In the *Xiang'er* commentary, the parallels with the cosmology of the earlier Mohist communities are strong: the high god not only hands down revelations but also rules over a pantheon of spirits who reward the good and punish the bad, but also calls on humans to create a comparable social hierarchy. Yet all three texts carry out critiques of the dominant religious practices of the day much further than the Mohists ever did. Although the Mohists opposed the notion that spirits were capricious, and opposed the notion that humans should try to control them through sacrifices, they did still advocate the practice of sacrifice: the key for the Mohists is that sacrifice should be performed not to transform the spirits but rather to inculcate in humans their gratitude to the moral pantheon of divinities.⁶⁹

In contrast, all three of the texts discussed here, albeit in somewhat different ways, opposed the practice of sacrifice altogether. In the conceptions found in *Xiang'er*, Laozi values ancestral sacrifices, but he does

⁶⁹ Puett, *To Become a God*, pp. 101–4.

so as part of a support for humans' procreating and creating lineages – a lesser use of the essence, but one that was necessary in order to keep the human species from dying out. But followers of the Way were called upon to avoid sacrifice altogether. And even those sacrifices that were going to continue among the lesser humans (the walking corpses) would only be for deceased humans. Spirits, on the contrary, are grown through essence, and are certainly never offered sacrifices.

Thus, most humans face death, have to procreate to continue their lines, become ghosts after death, and have to receive sacrifices to be made into an ancestor. But this path, necessary to continue the human species, is also destructive of the cosmos. Thus, Laozi gives us revelations, teaching us that instead of dissipating our energies and essence, we can instead use them to nourish spirits, thus becoming transcendent and helping to refine the cosmos.

In *Laozi zhongjing* the point is asserted even more strongly, and certainly with greater elaboration. There exists, according to the text, an entire pantheon of spirits who are emanations of primal energy. They exist both in the larger cosmos and within the human body. One does not sacrifice to them but rather visualizes them according to the practices revealed by Laozi. Moreover, even the gods that were commonly recipients of sacrifice at the time, including deceased humans, exist as well within the human body, and here too one does not sacrifice to them but rather visualizes them and nourishes them with energies and essence.

Although the outer version of *Huangting jing* does not lay out its pantheon explicitly, the general principles are similar to those of *Laozi zhongjing*. Here too there exists a set of spirits in the cosmos and in the human body. One does not sacrifice to them but rather nourishes them and links them through the circulation of energies and essence. And since this is what Laozi himself does in the larger cosmos, our bodies, when we nourish spirits, become like Laozi himself.

In all three texts, therefore, the argument is not that the ghosts of popular concern do not exist. There are indeed dead humans who eat ancestral sacrifices, are placed into lineage systems, and so on. But the argument of the three texts is that there exists a higher pantheon outside of the world of human procreation and outside of the world of sacrifice. And all three texts, albeit in slightly different ways, assert that these spirits exist in the human body as well.

In this opposition to sacrifice, all three texts were very similar to the Warring States and early-Han self-divinization techniques, which

also opposed sacrifice. And, in the case of the *Xiang'er* commentary, the practice of completing spirits is very comparable to that found in the self-divinization literature. But, in *Laozi zhongjing* and *Huangting jing* one finds the explicit advocacy of visualizing spirits.

One of the key issues with such a practice is that it builds upon many of the attributes of sacrificial practice. As mentioned before, sacrifice was an attempt to transform ghosts and capricious spirits into ancestors and (hopefully) supportive spirits. This involved defining the spirits, providing them with a form, and giving them a temple name within a hierarchy and set of connections determined by the human sacrificers. In other words, the goal of sacrificial practice was to form the highly capricious ghosts and spirits into specific roles defined by and for humans.

Spirit visualization is actually similar, but with the direction reversed. Here it is the highest deity who reveals the forms of the spirits to the humans (instead of having humans define the spirits), and the resulting benefits are thus a gift from the highest deity, rather than a human attempt to place capricious spirits into roles defined by humans. *Laozi zhongjing*, for example, designates for the spirits a form, name, and defined place in a hierarchy, and these are revealed by Laozi to the practitioner. The names, forms, and place, in other words, are not given by humans in an attempt to domesticate the spirits; Laozi on the contrary is revealing to humans what the names, forms, and place of the spirit really are.

Thus, the adept visualizes the form and name of each spirit and nourishes them through energies and essence. They are then connected through this process, and the human body comes to function as a unified cosmos, in which the spirits regulating each area are kept in place and linked to each other. The practitioner thus becomes the master of the spirits that he grows, nourishes, keeps in place, and connects into a single system.

Like the self-divinization techniques, the spirit visualization techniques involved attempts to cultivate the spirits that exist within the human body. And, like the sacrificial techniques, the practices were aimed at placing these spirits and defining their place. And like the much earlier Mohists, all of this is asserted in terms of a cosmology of a higher pantheon of deities, with a high god offering revelations to humanity.

This blending of earlier cosmological positions and practices would ultimately become tremendously significant in Chinese history. If the

cosmology of the Mohists gained few adherents in early China, this distinctive position developing in Chinese late antiquity would on the contrary become extraordinarily important. As with the Celestial Masters, institutionalized communities started forming around divine revelations, with adherents following a regimen defined in opposition to the dominant religious practices of sacrifice. New revelations would continue occurring and new practices would continue being developed, but a new paradigm had now been formed from which numerous figures and millenarian movements would continue to draw.

It is telling in this regard to read Ge Hong's fourth-century *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, which attempts to reassert the much-older claim that techniques of transcendence – just like all technological innovations and ethical developments – are human creations, rather than divine revelations.⁷⁰ Ge Hong clearly felt himself to be on the defensive in making such an argument – a strong indication of the changes that had occurred over the previous three centuries. Even if such claims of divine revelation and opposition to sacrifice would continue to be a minority position in Chinese history, after the period of late antiquity it had become the significant minority position around which several later Daoist, Buddhist, and millenarian movements would be formed. The religious landscape of China had changed dramatically.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HTJ	<i>Huangting jing</i> 黃庭經, as found in <i>Yunji qiqian</i> 雲笈七籤
LZZJ	<i>Laozi zhongjing</i> 老子中經, as found in <i>Yunji qiqian</i> 雲笈七籤
XE	<i>Xiang'er</i> 想爾, as printed in <i>Ōfuchi</i> 大淵, <i>Tonkō Dōkyō: Zurokuhen</i> 敦煌道經, 圖錄編

⁷⁰ Michael Puett, “Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity: Ge Hong’s *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi*),” *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 29 (2007), pp. 95–119.