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From the Experiences of the Mountains and the Seas to the Experiments of Alchemy

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the Chinese imagination and “logic” that construct both literal and figurative ways of ascending to heaven from the mythic or imaginary facts to the pragmatic and spiritual practice. Many Taoist philosophers and alchemists draw on figurative language and allegories to demonstrate abstract notions and wisdom. This figurative mediation is reminiscent of Plato’s approach in staging Socrates as a “teller of myth”. The present study thus resorts to the theory of the imaginary to better illuminate the underlying symbolism and the universal imaginary in Chinese texts and thought. The Taoist imagination of celestial ascension evolves from the mythic figures, to the rhetorical figures of metaphysics, through to theoretical and literary alchemy. This imaginary actualization is possible through the spatial and temporal passages offered by mountain caves and animal rides.

KEYWORDS

Taoism, alchemy, myth, imaginary, symbolism, metaphysics, literature.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore l’imaginaire et la « logique » qui construisent dans la pensée chinoise les moyens littéraires et figuratifs de monter au ciel, depuis les faits mythiques ou imaginaires jusqu’à la pratique spirituelle et pragmatique. De nombreux philosophes et alchimistes taoïstes s’appuient sur le langage figuratif et allégorique pour rendre compte de notions abstraites et de la sagesse. Cette médiation figurative n’est pas sans rappeler l’approche de Platon qui représente Socrate comme un « conteur de mythe ». La présente étude recourt ainsi à la théorie de l’imaginaire pour mieux éclairer le symbolisme sous-jacent et l’imaginaire universel dans les textes et la pensée chinoise. L’imagination taoïste de l’ascension céleste évolue à partir des figures mythiques, jusqu’aux figures rhétoriques de la métaphysique, *via* l’alchimie théorique et littéraire. Cette actualisation imaginaire est rendue possible par les passages spatio-temporels offerts par les grottes montagneuses et les montures animales.

MOTS-CLÉS

Taoïsme, alchimie, mythe, imaginaire, symbolisme, métaphysique, littérature.

In the beginning, gods and men seemed to be close and coexisting. Gods were ubiquitous; men were not denied the right to communicate with gods or reach the divine realm. The legendary “celestial ladder(s)” that connect(s) heaven and earth appeared to exist. Likewise, the kingdom of immortality and the elixir of long life were represented in philosophical, literary and historical writings. In Antiquity, the Bachelardian nocturnal dreamlike flight (Bachelard, 1943) was literally presented and represented in myths and legends. Yet, following the breaking of celestial ladders, imagined in many civilizations, man has been denied the right to enter the ethereal zone. They thus drudge and endeavor to figure out a way back to this nostalgic space. Be it remnants in our collective memory of the archaic nostalgia or simply a projection of our implacable fear confronting ineluctable time and death, the conception of the way(s) to heaven reveals a universal imagination of ascent versus descent and of returning to the *unus mundus* or oneness versus departing and severing.

The title phrase “the experiences of the mountains and the seas” refers to and defines the book *Shanhai jing*. A perpetual “myth” in Chinese civilization, the book has drawn the attention of scholars for centuries. In his recent study of Chinese fantastic literature, Ouyang (1997) based on some contemporary criticisms, interpreted the word “*jing*” as “experiences or to experience” rather than the conventional meaning of “the classic” or “scripture” (p. 10). The book is thus regarded as a record of the experiences undergone by the emperor Yu the Great (ca. 2183–2177 BC) of Xia. According to the writing of the Taoist philosopher Lie Zi (?–?; 1991), Yu the Great encountered strange and unheard-of phenomena, his minister Buoy Yi designated them, and the writer Yi Jian noted them down. Therefore, it is more cogent to annotate “*jing*” as “experiences (of Yu the Great)”. *Shanhai jing*, originally entitled *Shanhai tu* (*The drawings of the mountains and the seas*), showcases a literal picture of imaginary spaces, times, and figures. In view of the experiences of antiquity recorded in this text, it inspires the Chinese progeny to enhance the everlasting mythopoeia, including the division of the Taoist alchemy, with the hope that ascent to heaven is attainable.

One significant reason why ancient Chinese people consider it probable to become immortals (*xian*) is the legendary success of Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor), the alleged ancestor of Chinese people. Already registered in *Shanhai jing*, the Yellow Emperor figures in many tales, for his alchemical practice was successful as he finally ascended to the sky by riding a divine dragon (Liu, 2004, p. 14). Animalism and the imagination of the element air are closely connected with immortality. The theriomorphic image is retained: the emperor is often depicted as resembling a dragon in many versions of the myth. His marvelous ability of speech, foreseeing the future and understanding the universal law is conducive to the imagination of a god of clouds in him.

However, not every man is as lucky as the Yellow Emperor or the emperor Mu of Zhou (another legendarily successful case of ascent to heaven) who fortuitously encounter goddesses or gods that possess the elixir of long life. Especially when times are gradually departing from the primitive age and men have evolved into

a more and more complex status, chances are few that we may become immortal gratuitously merely with help of immortals or gods. Therefore, Taoist alchemists researched and developed workable methods to become immortal. These methods are further divided into external alchemy and internal alchemy. On the other hand, imaginative writers, by means of “verbal alchemy”, have envisioned possible ways of ascending to heaven and created a kaleidoscope of literary texts.

This article attempts to explore the Chinese imagination and “logic”¹ that construct both literal and figurative ways of ascending to heaven from the mythic or imaginary facts to the spiritual and pragmatic practice. Since many Taoist philosophers and alchemists draw on figurative language and allegories to demonstrate abstract notions and wisdom, which is reminiscent of Plato’s approach (Plato, 1998) in staging Socrates as a “teller of myth”, the present study will resort to the theory of the imaginary, proposing an integral view of *mythos* and *logos*, to better illuminate the underlying symbolism and the universal imaginary in Chinese texts and thought.

Between *Mythos* and *Logos*: From the Mythic Figures to the Rhetorical Figures of Metaphysics

For mythologists, *Shanhai jing* bears the most important sources, while for literati, it has always been esteemed as “the ancestor of discoursing the weird” or “*gujin yuguai zhi zu*” (Hu, Yinglin). It is not only the cradle of imagination to Chinese writers but also the reservoir of sources (apparently imaginary but essentially revealing) for myths, geography, geology, astronomy, zoology, botany, mineralogy, water conservancy, alchemy, theology, medicine, archeology, anthropology, oceanography, technology, ethnology, religion, etc. More and more researches prove that certain weird statements in this book are true, though other descriptions still await authentication (Ouyang, 1997, pp. 17–8). In light of Owen Barfield’s theory of the evolution of human consciousness, people at the stage of original participation (from Antiquity to the Middle Ages in European civilization) perceived the world by seeing that they were part of it (Barfield, 1988). This is reminiscent of Jung’s primitive participation (Jung, 1997) and Levy-Bruhl’s primitive mentality (Levy-Bruhl, 1992). In this manner, people at this stage preserve a vision of oneness towards the outer world. We may assume that people in the times of *Shanhai jing* belong to the aforementioned stage of original participation, where figures are taken as both *rhetorical figures* and *literal figures*. This can serve to interpret why figures and things described in *Shanhai jing* are as concrete and real before the eyes of the author(s).

In this book, the notion of celestial ladders is represented by gigantic towering mountains and trees. The description of the elixir of long life and the administering goddess of death and life, the Mother Goddess of the West (Xiwangmu), suggest

1. C. G. Jung contested that Chinese people have their specific “logic” in retorting Hu Shi’s derogatory comments on the *Yi Jing* divination’s illogical absurdity and superstition.

the probability of immortality. Besides the goddess imagined as half-human, half-beast, many gods are depicted in like manner. This imagination of bestial deities, and later metamorphosis between man and animal, can be interpreted *par excellence* with Gilbert Durand's theory of the imaginary (1992): the theriomorphic images represent the devouring visage of time, thus the ineluctability of death. The fluidity and passing of time is associated with dynamic animalism, which also underlies the Taoist practice of imitating animals. In contrast, divine mountains and trees taken as the celestial ladders represent immobile minerals and vegetation, which symbolically characterize eternity. According to Mircea Eliade's study of myth and alchemy, Chinese alchemy better illustrates the alchemical operation that reveals a reverse process of cosmogony: from human, animal, and vegetation back through to geology. He qualifies alchemy as eschatological (Eliade, 1990, pp. 112–4).

The idea of divine mountains or trees appears in almost all civilizations. Gods are imagined to inhabit the mountains, for example, the Greek Mount Olympus, the Hindu Himalaya, Inca Andes, or the Hebrew Zion. The Chinese civilization is no exception. It imagines a divine mountain Kunlun, which is believed to be the principal pillar connected with the sky (eight mountain pillars are said to support the sky). Kunlun Mountain is the supreme divine mountain in *Shanhai jing*, where it figures more than twenty times. Moreover, it is considered the most divine mountain in the Taoist religion. In addition, *Shanhai jing* also describes a pivot of the sky: "In the middle of the wilderness is a mountain called Sun Moon Mountain, which is the pivot of the sky. The mountain of Wujutianmen is the place where the sun and the moon enter." (2007, p. 244)² In similar fashion, the mountain as the place where the sun and the moon depart is also indicated: Yitiansumen (p. 224). Critics also speculate that some other mountains in *Shanhai jing* can be counted as the alleged celestial ladders:

- 1) The Wuxian region is situated in northern Nuchou. The people here hold a turquoise snake in the right hand, a red snake in the left. This place is called Dengbao Mountain. This is the passage for sorcerers and sorceresses to ascend to heaven and descend to earth. (p. 184)
- 2) There is a Soul Mountain; ten sorcerers and sorceresses ascend to the sky and wherefrom descend to earth. This is a place where myriad herbs flourish. (p. 245)
- 3) In the east of Hua Mountain and Turquoise River is a mountain called Zhao Mountain. A man named Buo Zigao goes upwards and downwards here until attaining to the sky. (p. 264)

Concerning the vegetal imagination, divine trees, in addition to divine mountains, also serve as a passageway for ascending to the sky. For example, the tree Xunmu is said to be thousands of *li* (1 *li* = 0.576 km) high and the tree of Sansang (three white mulberries) in the east of Ousi, with a height of hundreds of *ren* (1 *ren* = 8/3 meters), lacks branches (chapter "Haiwai Beijing", p. 191). Further,

2. All the quotations from Chinese books are my translations.

a latter chapter “Hainei jing” describes a kind of tree called Jianmu, which is hundreds of *ren* high but lacking branches. It is said that the Yellow Emperor cultivated this divine tree (p. 265).

Vertically with this uninterrupted connection between the earth and the sky, the Chinese mythic imagination offers the conception of immortality, both spatial and temporal. Immortal countries or places are represented or visited as real geography in *Shanhai jing*: “There is a country called the country of immortality. The citizens assume the last name ‘Ah’ and feed on the wood that grants immortality.” (p. 232) Since countries or places of immortality exist and the heaven is accessible via divine mountains and trees, it is natural to imagine the elixir of long life, which is initially linked to divinity and animality.

The first mythic figure believed to be the possessor of the elixir is the very one that controls death and life, the Mother Goddess of the West. She is said to feed on the ambrosia sought by three divine turquoise birds (p. 207). The famous story about the fairy of the moon, Chang Er, was also derived from the legend about the Mother Goddess. Immortality is thus integrated into the legend of the sun-shooting hero Hou Yi, the moon fairy’s husband. Chang Er was originally a goddess but was abased into human form because of her husband’s slaughtering the nine suns, also sons of the celestial God. In order to comfort his wife, Hou Yi travels to Kunlun Mountain to beseech the Mother Goddess for divine pills and is eventually granted two. But out of greed, Chang Er steals and eats both pills. Her body becomes lighter and lighter and thus floats and flies to the sky. Unfortunately, the overdose of two pills causes her to rocket up directly to the moon, where she now lives alone.

Along with gods and goddesses, sorcerers are described as holding the elixir of long life as healers. *Shanhai jing* tells that sorcerers chase away the breath of death from the corpse of Yayu to resurrect him (chapter “Hainei xijing”, p. 207). The elixir of long life is mentioned many times in the book, often with a guardian beast arranged beside it. In the chapter “Dahuang nanjing”, readers learn about a mountain called Wu, with a yellow bird staying in its west. Gods enjoy the elixir at eight places around here. The bird is in charge of watching the elixir to prevent the black serpent from stealing it (p. 231). This narrative evokes the universal imagination of the serpent that violates the hope of immortality, such as the serpent that snatches the elixir of youth from Gilgamesh in the earliest epic and the snake in the biblical Eden.

The imagination of the rupture of the “celestial ladder” and the ensuing continual separation between the sky and the earth is present in many civilizations. In the Chinese civilization, the divine emperor Zhuanxu orders the breaking of the connection between the sky and the earth by sending his grandsons to distance the two: the first grandson Zhung holds the sky with his hands; the other named Li pushes the earth downwards with his hands (p. 244). Although the connection and the passageway is thus broken, the mountains and trees considered as celestial ladders bridging the earth and the sky, the described countries and status of immortality, and the existence of the elixir of long life, all underlie the Chinese imaginary

of space, time and medium that leads back to the sky. This imaginary will later be represented in philosophical, alchemical and fantastic writings.

If the divine figures and spaces in mythic writings are a literal *mise en scene* before our eyes, they become a metaphysical topic in the philosophical discourses. After his initial storytelling of a tale of *zhiguai* (narrating the fantastic), Zhuang Zi (ca. 369–286 BC) continued his discourse on boundless liberty in contrast to confined vision by presenting a dialogue between two fictive characters, Jian Wu and Lian Shu. Jian tells Lian that he hears from Jie Yu (hermit of the kingdom of Chu, during the Spring and Autumn Epoch 770–476 BC) a ridiculous discourse that violates natural law. It is a brief description of the deities that inhabit the mountain of Miaoguye (or the remote mountain of Guye). In fact, the mountain with the name of Guye was first written of in *Shanhai jing* as the divine mountain island in the sea Lieguye or the country Guye (p. 217). Jie states that the deities, with skin as white as snow, “are as beautiful and graceful as virgins. They do not eat five grains but inhale air and drink dew. Riding on the clouds and dragons, they travel beyond the boundaries of the world. With spirit concentrated, they keep all things on track and secure the annual harvest of the five grains” (p. 10). Jian criticizes it as false and nonsense. However, Lian replies by bringing to light the limitations of human perception and wisdom:

Of course, the blind cannot appreciate beautiful colors and patterns; the deaf cannot appreciate the music of bells and drums. Could it be said that humans are only physically blind and deaf? Certain people are blind and deaf in wisdom. The words spoken by Jie Yu are as marvelous as a damsel. (p. 10)

Thus Zhuang Zi (2005) employed the relativity between the infinite and the finite or the unknown and the known to prove that the non-existence of deities or other supernatural phenomena cannot be proved.

The philosophy underlying the imagination of ascending to the sky is elaborately developed in Lie Zi’s cosmogony (Lie, 1991). Taoist philosophers and alchemists highlight the idea of the pure and lighter floating upwards and of the turbid and heavier falling downwards. Lie Zi’s cosmogony is derived and transformed from Lao Zi’s. He developed his theory of subsequent metamorphoses from Taiyi, Taichu, Taishi to Taisu. These four stages correspond to Lao Zi’s “Tao generates one, one generates two, two generate three, and three generate all beings and things” (Lao, 1981, p. 42). The cosmogonical principle resides in the dialectic of transparent lightness and turbid heaviness. Later, another Taoist Liu An (179 BC–122, 2001), also known as Huainan Zi, elaborated this Taoist cosmogony in his work *Huainan Zi*. Like Lie Zi, he combined Taoist metaphysics with myths. He asserted that Tao is ubiquitous and comprehensive but it is also shapeless and imageless as well as impalpable and immeasurable. Nevertheless, he revolutionized Lao Zi’s assumption that “Tao generates one” and proposed that “Tao originates from one”. In this way, Tao has become a substantial Tao, the universal oneness. By the same token, the “two” designates the *qi* of *yin* and *yang*, whereas the “three” refers to the harmonized *qi* derived from the combination of *yin* and *yang*.

In this light, the primitive state before the shaping of the universe was a complete chaos called Taishi. Then Taishi produces the status of nothingness and immensity named Xukuo, which in turns produces the universe. It follows that the universe conceives the pristine *qi*, the pure and lighter of which forms the sky, and the turbid and heavier the earth. The essence of the combined air from the sky and the earth transforms into the *yin* and the *yang*, which form the four seasons and subsequently all beings and things. Huainan Zi concluded his cosmogony by referring to the “celestial ladder”, the mountain Buzhou, and the myth about Gonggong whose head struck the mountain and broke the supporting pillar of the sky out of anger while rivaling the emperor Zhuanxu. This act caused the sky to tilt (chapter “Tianwen”, pp. 92–3). In fact, both the divine mountain Buzhou and the mythic figure Gonggong appeared in *Shanhai jing*. Nevertheless, the tale about Gonggong rivaling the emperor Zhuanxu for the imperial throne was first narrated by Huainan Zi.

The common element among these Taoists’ discourses is the principle of the pure and lighter ascending against the turbid and heavier descending. This universality may cross cultural boundaries. Analogous ideas can be found in Greek philosophy, in particular, along the lines of Platonic metaphysics (Zeyl, 2005).³ Bachelard (1943) used the “lightness” of the element air to characterize the dreamy flight (pp. 27–84). The element earth in contrast represents heaviness and settling. Gilbert Durand (1992) followed Bachelard’s material imagination of the four elements and developed his systems of the diurnal and nocturnal imaginary, pivoting on the vertical vector of ascending and descending. Interestingly, Taoist philosophy and alchemy exert important influence on both French theorists. The abstract metaphysics and imaginary phenomenology underlying the imagination of ascending to heaven will be concretized by the Taoist experimentation of alchemy. This harks back to the depiction of divine caves, mountains, deities, the elixir of long life, and narratives about immortality taken as true.

Theoretical and Literary Alchemy: Literal and Figurative Ways to Heaven

The Chinese conception of the ways of ascending to heaven is both literal and figurative. Generally, philosophers, alchemists and writers took the ascent to the sky literally until the Song Dynasty (960–1278), after which the idealist school of Confucianism reigned in. Afterward, the so-called ascent to the sky has been taken rather metaphorically, which is similar to the spiritual ascension conceived in other religions. Nevertheless, the Taoist vision eventually combines both the literal and

3. In his *Timaeus*, Plato introduces the arcane concept of *chôra* and explains it further in the section concerning Physics. It is the initial state of a perpetually unstable space of silence with spastic motions that produce manifestations of the inarticulate traces of the four basic elements, a pre-cosmic beginning before the fashioning of the basic corpuscles (*sômata*). In the process of the movement of the elements, the lighter goes upward while the heavier downwards. These four elements are the same elements presumed by Empedocles: fire, air, water and earth, which are the inspiring source of Bachelard’s theory of the imaginary.

figurative. This is not unique in Chinese civilization. In effect, Barfield's study of the evolution of human consciousness brings to light the ideal of universal oneness, manifested in the linguistic semantic unity, of the figurative and the literal (Barfield, 1988). His philological hypothesis further assumes that the origin of language is myth, which represented the original participation of human consciousness by its semantic unity. This unity contained the oneness of the concrete and abstract or the figurative and literal. Moreover, his theory is all the more fitting to reading this co-existence of the figurative and literal in Chinese language and narrative because Barfield indeed refers to Chinese language to illustrate his theorization (Barfield, 1973).

Grounded in the mythic legacy and metaphysical thinking, Chinese writers continue the relay of elaborating upon storytelling and teaching the methods for becoming immortals and ascending to heaven. During the period prior to the Six Dynasties (220–589), the thinking of *shenxian* (immortals) fascinated most Chinese, ranging from emperors to common people. The art of Huang Lao (the Yellow Emperor and Lao Zi), the art of Wu Xing (the five elements: gold, wood, water, fire and earth) and the thinking of *Yi Jing* had been instilled into the quest for immortality, *dandao* (The Tao of golden pills or alchemy). According to Xiao Dengfu (1989), the Chinese did not have the idea of an inferno until its importation with Buddhism from India towards the latter period of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). This original absence of the infernal imagination may additionally expound the Chinese optimistic vision of their quest for immortality.

Therefore, immortality can be attained. This affirmative statement appears in many alchemic writings, theoretical or literary. The dream of being immortal and returning to the sky is poeticized in the first book of Chinese fantastic tales: *Liexian zhuan* (*The Biographies of the Immortals*) by Liu Xiang (79–8 BC) from the Han Dynasty. The author positively claimed the authenticity of the events. The book describes how the seventy immortals reached the supreme state of immortality or divinity. Liu (2004) argues in the envoi of this book that becoming immortal is not abnormal or incredible since immortality or ultra-longevity can be found in vegetation and animals, such as old trees and turtles. The purpose of his book is to uncover the fact that gods and immortals do exist and their status can be obtained by humans.

Through mythic and metaphysical writings, people learned from various successful cases that immortality is possible and flying to the divine realm is attainable. Later, Taoist alchemists and philosophers further contributed to the collective writings of diverse ways that lead to heaven. Among these alchemists, Wei Buoyang (Han Dynasty) is counted as the most influential to his progeny. His landmark masterpiece *Zhou Yi cantong qi*, regarded as the earliest theoretical writing of the Taoist sect of Danding (alchemical tripod), has long been the subject of annotation and research. This abstruse classic of both external and internal alchemy integrates the method of the Yellow Emperor, the thinking of Lao Zi and the philosophy of *Yi Jing*. Wei (2007) followed the principle of the harmonization between fire and

water in *Yi Jing*, thus between the trigram of *li* and the trigram of *kan*. In terms of alchemy, this means to use the water of *kan* to relieve the fire of *li*. Albeit his theory and methodology solidified, credible historical records do not offer any proof that Wei Buoyang did succeed in becoming immortal or ascending to the sky. Readers are unable to authenticate the effectiveness of Wei's methods. Nevertheless, Ge Hong (284–364), the most important writer of both alchemical instructions and tales, has provided us with an engrossing story about Wei's becoming immortal in *Shenxian zhuan* (*The Biographies of Gods and Immortals*, 2004), the tale being entitled "Wei Buoyang". Following the narrative style of Liu Xiang telling stories about immortals, Ge Hong advocated Taoist alchemy, in particular external alchemy, in both his literary and theoretical writings: *Shenxian zhuan* (*The Biographies of the Immortals*, 2004) and *Baopu Zi* (2001).

In the biography of Wei Buoyang (2007), he is narrated as being born of a noble family and born to love Taoist art and thinking. He practiced external alchemy in the mountains with disciples. Because most people doubted the effectiveness of golden pills, Wei tried to test his three disciples' sincerity and determination. He made a dog swallow a poisonous golden pill; the dog died right away. As his disciples were stunned and unnerved by this scene, Wei claimed that his ultimate purpose of this long reclusive life in the mountains was to practice Tao and become immortal and that he would take the pill even at the risk of his life. He then also took a pill and died immediately. Having seen this frustrating scene, two disciples argued that they came all the way to the remote mountains in order to become immortal, but their master's failure made them helpless. However, the third disciple contested that their master was different from ordinary people and his death must thus imply some profound significance. Accordingly, he followed suit and died. Witnessing this third death scene, the two staggered disciples decided to return to the secular world, for at least they still had decades to live instead of dying straight away. After these two returned home, Wei came to and gave the antidote to the dog and his faithful disciple. They both became immortals and ascended to the divine realm. Before leaving, Wei asked a woodsman to deliver a farewell letter to his two daunted disciples, who regretted their error for good (p. 53).

Ge Hong (2001) asserted that the key to flying to the divine realm is the golden pill, the quintessence of external alchemy. He states in the "Jin Dan" or "The Golden Pill" chapter of *Baopu Zi*:

According to *Huangdi jiuding shendan jing* (*The scripture of the Golden Pills of the Yellow Emperor's Nine Tripods*), the Yellow Emperor took the pill and thus flew to the sky and became immortal. [...] Taking the divine pill unbinds the limit of longevity and makes man as eternal as the sky and the earth. Man can ride the glowing clouds and the soaring dragon to ascend up to and descend from Tai Qing or heaven. (p. 95)

In his alchemical theory, Ge Hong divides immortals into three ranks: the celestial immortal, the earthly immortal and the corpse-dissolution immortal. He cites *Xian jing* (*The Scripture of Immortals*) and explains that "the supreme Taoist alchemist that can fly with the entire body is called the celestial immortal; the middle Taoist

alchemist that can travel amidst the divine mountains is called the earthly immortal; the lesser Taoist alchemist that dies first and then transforms into an immortal is called the corpse-dissolution immortal" (p. 45). He further expounds the different ranks of immortals by discriminating their positions and circumstances: "The highest rank of attaining the Tao is ascending to the sky and becoming a divine official; the middle rank of attaining Tao is ascending to Kunlun Mountain and perching there; the lowest rank of attaining Tao is becoming immortal and residing in the earthly world." (p. 100) He often quoted successful alchemists' discourses to exemplify his theory, such as Wei Buoyang and Yin Changsheng (Han Dynasty).

Yin Changsheng, the first annotator of Wei Buoyang's alchemical classic *Zhouyi cantung qi*, was said to be the disciple of Ma Mingsheng (who became immortal by flying to the sky after he encountered a goddess, passed her test, and gained the golden pill). He allegedly cooked loess into gold to help poor people, and eventually took the golden pill and ascended to heaven. Ge Hong elaborated on the story about Yin in developing some comments on becoming immortals. In Ge's narration, Yin had worked merely as a base servant for his master Ma for more than twenty years. All of the disciples except Yin had returned home because Ma taught them nothing about Tao. Ma thus took Yin, who had passed the trial, to the divine Chingcheng Mountain and revealed to him the secret of gold. Yin was also granted the secret of divine pills and did succeed in refining some. He took only half a pill to gain immortality but did not immediately ascend to the sky in order to be able to help people in the secular world for some more years. He lived with his family, who also remained young. Finally, he flew to the sky, leaving a scripture which states that "people in Antiquity having become immortals are too many to enumerate. But since the establishment of the Han Dynasty, forty-five (including myself, forty-six) have become immortals. Twenty among them were the corpse-dissolution immortals; the rest attained the diurnal ascension (celestial immortals)" (p. 133). In Yin's biography, Ge Hong embeds a brief commentary, which argues that if people do not walk at night, they will not be aware of nocturnal wayfarers. Therefore, those who are unable to become immortals will never know about the people who practiced Tao and became immortals in the mountains and forests. He further quotes Yin's own words concerning the truth about diurnal flight to heaven: the prime way to fly to heaven is nothing but taking the golden pills, the goal of which can never be achieved by means of circulating the *qi*, animal conduction, physical exercises, or taking divine herbs. Ge Hong's narration tells that Yin had stayed in man's world for 170 years with an infant complexion and ascended to heaven afterwards (pp. 132-40).

Following the narrative style initiated by Liu Xiang and Ge Hong, narratives about immortals are characterized by three features: the quest for the skill of becoming immortal, the practice of Tao to ascend to the sky and enjoy eternal happiness and wealth, and consummate virtue as the qualification of becoming immortal. The characters becoming immortals are represented through different patterns. They feel neither hungry nor cold; they normally feed on the wind and drink the

dew; they are so pure and light that they can fly; the immortals, being pure, can return to the infantile stage; they can be divine musicians; they resurrect or become immortals after the corpse dissolves; they directly fly to the sky, etc. To sum up, in light of Liu Xiang's *Liexian zhuan* (2004), the ways of becoming immortals are mainly three kinds: taking the immortality pill, preserving one's health by taking the pill, and virtuous deeds. Evolving with later fantastic tales after Ge Hong such as Pei Xing's *Chuangqi* (Tang Dynasty) and other alchemical discourses, methods for becoming immortals are generally accepted as follows: simply encountering gods and immortals, taking the golden pill, correct sexual art, or alchemical meditation.

The correct sexual art as a means to ultimate truth and immortality is not unique to Chinese civilization. Hinduism and European alchemy also propose similar methods. Yet, the art of sex has remained a rare method for alchemists to practice Tao, though legends go that the Yellow Emperor also perfected the art of sex with all of his concubines by following the instruction of a goddess Su Nü, who is also mentioned in *Shanhai jing* (2007, p. 264), but not under the present circumstance related to sex. The 66th immortal listed in Liu Xiang's *Liexian zhuan* (2004) is one of the few cases addressing the art of sex. It concerns the immortal Nü Wan who, as the hostess of a tavern, encountered divine customers and peeped at their scripture about sex *Sushu* (*The Book of Su Nü*) while serving wine. She memorized the methods and later invited lads to have sex with her. After doing this for thirty years, she retained an appearance of youth. Finally, an immortal came and jested with her by saying "why not fly while full-fledged?" It is said that she left home to follow the immortal but no one knows the outcome of this (p. 219). Though she is ranked among the immortals, it is clear that the art of sex did not make her fly to heaven since she has yet to follow the immortal that approached her.

After the Tang Dynasty (618–960), the alchemical practice shifted its focus to internal alchemy. It seems that gods or immortals seldom descended to grant golden pills, and divine animals were rarely sent out to give those who were born with "divine bones" a ride. Nevertheless, people continued to dream of becoming immortal to ascend to heaven, with the hope that this could be attained by means of spiritual meditation or power. The concession was made that becoming immortal did not mean literally immortal but rather figuratively, which is rather close to the rank of Ge Hong's corpse-dissolution immortal. The central idea lies in the immortality of soul. Henceforth, the mind and the soul will play a crucial role in the way of becoming immortal to ascend to celestial space. This way of practice is termed internal alchemy. Detailed and concrete instructions of the alchemical practice are illustrated in two important works: *Xingming guizhi* (*The Rule and Purpose of Life*) and *Taiyi jinghua zongzhi* (*The Secret of the Golden Flowers*). Resuming the rules and instructions in the writings of external alchemy, the teaching of internal alchemy takes the former metaphorically. For example, internal alchemy also describes the "diurnal ascension" but from a figurative perspective. Successful alchemists will not literally fly to the sky flesh and blood, but spiritually ascend to heaven after dying. Nonetheless, the aforementioned two books still assert that Taoist immortals are divided into five ranks: the celestial immortal, the divine immortal, the

earthly immortal, the human immortal and the ghost immortal;⁴ or the celestial immortal, the divine immortal, the earthly immortal, the sword immortal and the ghost immortal.⁵

Though internal alchemy is often considered as a spiritual alchemy, some scriptures reveal that once the alchemist reaches the supreme state of the spiritual flying to the sky, gods or celestial immortals will condescend to recognize his success by granting him the genuine divine golden pill. He will therefore achieve a veritable diurnal ascension, *flesh and blood*. In this manner, the figurative ascension is reunited with the literal ascension, the successful alchemist becoming an authentic divine figure. This hypothesis has remained a secret, just as the translated title of the book *The Secret of the Golden Flower* implies. Maybe this secret of reunification of the figurative and the literal or of spirit and matter is the very reason why C. G. Jung highly esteemed and prefaced this arcane Taoist book, translated by R. Wilhelm (Jung & Wilhem, 1975). His acknowledgement that Taoist alchemy provides him with a solution to the rupture between the material and the spiritual, after more than fifteen years of research in Western alchemy, may invite a further exploration of the literal and the figurative diurnal ascension of Taoist alchemy, both external and internal.

Mountain Caves and Animals: Spatial and Temporal Passage to Heaven

For both external and internal alchemy, mountainous space and animal dynamics are two essential elements for refining the golden pills or the practice of Tao. The Chinese character for immortals or *xian*, 仙, is written as a man next to the mountain. The most common setting for man to encounter gods or immortals and for alchemists to facilitate their practice is the cave, in particular the mountain cave.

The conception of caves related to death and life is derived from the narration about the Mother Goddess of the West in *Shanhai jing*. She is said to live in a cave of Kunlun Mountain and control life and death. As mentioned earlier, she is depicted as possessing the elixir of long life. The records of caves related to the elixir and deities arouse Chinese offspring to follow suit and envision that to become divine immortals is probable and feasible in caves and mountains. Quanzhenjiao's (the Taoist sect of absolute truth) practice necessitates an enclosed space, normally a cave (most often in the mountains), which is termed "*huan du*" ("encircled and blocked"). The underlying rationalization lies in the immortality out of mortality, for the encircled and blocked murky space is in reality no more than a live tomb of the dead. Therefore, by means of the present practice, alchemists do not have to literally die to resurrect because the spatial symbol serves the purpose.

4. According to Zhong Lichuan and Lü Dongbin, two of the eight immortals, who are repeatedly said in classic tales and vernacular novels to fly across the sea and fight with the family of the dragon kings. Lü Dongbin is the alleged author of *The Secret of the Golden Flowers*.

5. According to Wang Chungyang, the founding father of the Taoist sect Quanzhenjiao or the Taoist sect of absolute truth.

Grounded in the mythic and metaphysical perception and conception of space and time, Taoist alchemists developed a complete setting of heavens of bliss: *Fudi Dongtian*. The assonance of “Dongtian” and “Tongtian” underlies the association of caves and the passage to heaven, for “Dongtian” means “the cave’s heaven” and “Tongtian” means “passage to or communicate with heaven”. The Taoist imagination has refined the rich alchemical reservoir throughout history to construct a universe of divine realms as thirty-six *Dongtian* and seventy-two *Fudi*:

In order to become *xian* (divine and immortal), Taoism constructs a space inhabited by deities, named *Xianjing*. This is the embodiment of the Taoist creed. These divine places spanning (1) heaven, such as *Sanqingjing* (Realm of three main gods), (2) the sea, such as the ten continents and three islands, (3) mountains and caves, such as the ten major *Dongtian*, thirty-six minor *dongtian* and seventy-two *Fudi*. The word *dong* means its quasi-homophone *tong*, which signifies “passage to or connect or communicate with”. Therefore, the spatial term *Dongtian* also refers to “passage to or communicate with heaven”. In order to accomplish Taoist practice, the earthly deities and fairies live in *Dongtian Fudi* to get connected with the celestial deities and thus get access to heaven. The word *fu* means “bliss” and *di* means “earth”. Those who live in *fudi* can live for several generations (Hu, 1995; Ren, 1989).⁶

This imagination of divine caves prevails in numerous fantastic narratives. The most preeminent representation of caves that bridge the mundane world and heaven is rendered in the novel *Fengshen yanyi* (*The Investiture of the Gods*) by Lu Xixing (2006). The leading character Jiang Ziya (also a historical figure), before becoming the prime minister, practiced Tao in the cavernous heaven Yüxü, governed by the god Yuanshi Tianzun. Most main characters with magic power stay in divine caves, for example, the divine palace of Nuocha’s master Taiyi Immortal is called Golden Light Cave (Jinguang Dong) and that of Yang Jian’s master Yuding Immortal is Golden Glow Cave (Jinxia Dong). Nuocha and Yang Jian are the most important warriors on the good side. This novel is a typical Chinese epic, where the establishment of a new kingdom Zhou and numerous battles of humans interact with and are controlled by gods and immortals. The story ends with Jiang Ziya’s dubbing all characters, both good and evil, with the titles of gods. Their souls ascend to heaven after death except for few heroes, such as Nuocha and Yang Jian, who become gods, flesh and blood, without dying. The novel evokes both ways of becoming immortal: the external and internal alchemy.

Taoist alchemists complement the spatial setting with the theriomorphic imagination. The nature of movement in animals inspires them to develop a special way called *daoyin* or animal conduction. By imitating animals, man can reconnect with the universe, as a transition to the ultimate metamorphosis into divinity. In similar fashion, Chinese alchemy also imagines the animal ride as the medium transmitting to the sky, for example, the dragon that transported the Yellow Emperor to heaven.

6. Information integrated and translated from the following sources: Hu Fushen’s *Zhonghua Daojiao Dacidian* (*The Great Chinese Taoist Dictionary*) and Ren Jiyu’s *Zongjiao Cidian* (*Dictionary of Religion*).

Taoist alchemists imagined that man should imitate animals to conduct the *qi* to succeed in the practice. This is all the more pertinent as we hark back to the form of the Mother Goddess of the West (Xiwangmu)—half-human, half-beast, living in a cave: “Xiwangmu looks human. She grows a leopard’s tail and a tiger’s teeth, and is good at howling. She wears Yüsheng (a kind of hair ornaments) in her dishevelled hair and dominates natural calamities and five punishments.” (p. 39) In the later versions of stories about the Mother Goddess, she is gradually described as a beautiful goddess like in *Mutianzi zhuan* (*The Biography of the Emperor Mu*) or *Hanwu liezhuan* (*The Biography of the Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty*). In the former story, readers are given another example of a mortal being able to become immortal; furthermore, this one happens to an emperor, the emperor Mu. This is the very primitive way of ascending to heaven, i.e. the easiest way: the mortals are granted the elixir of long life by the deities or immortals. In the present case, it is the Mother Goddess that invites the emperor to eat and drink the ambrosia at Kunlun Mountain and most importantly, partake of the elixir of long life.

The existence of the Mother Goddess symbolizes the transitional divine space (the mountain cave), immortality (the elixir of long life) and the dynamic atemporal temporality (animal form as *anima*). In light of Durand’s theory (1992) treating the theriomorphic images as both the visage of time and evouring space, the Mother Goddess’s form of a leopard and her dwelling in a lair constitute the necessary passage to immortality, the elixir of long life held by the goddess. In alchemical practice, the act of ascending movement via the animal ride can be interpreted as transcending time into immortal space. The practice of *daoyin* or animal conduction accordingly pertains to the integration into and the final return to time. The residues of the images of divine animals in *Shanhai jing* are later metamorphosed into the divine animals of the ascending ride. The successful immortals have a great variety of rides to sky. The highest-class ride is soaring into the sky by riding the dragon (e.g. the Yellow Emperor, Ma Shihuang or Tao Angong). It is also possible to ride the clouds (alleged to be the metamorphoses of dragons) to ascend to the sky (e.g. Xie Ziran). Sometimes immortals ride the carp (e.g. Zi Ying), the phoenix (e.g. Xiao Shi and Nong Yu), or the crane (e.g. Wang Ziqiao). Sometimes the immortals themselves have become a flying animal and thus rise without mounting any divine animals. The most practical and beneficial is to fly to the sky with one’s household (e.g. *Huainan Zi*). Or the immortal rises solely by himself (e.g. Yin Changsheng or Huang Yuanji). According to certain credible statistics, more than one hundred thousand people have become immortals from Antiquity until approximately Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Among these immortals, more than eight thousand cases are of ascension with the household (*Xingming*, 2005, p. 141). The logic of the relationship between man and animal further serves as the substratum of fantastic narratives on the metamorphosis between these two general species. By the same token, the natural reaction and reception of the Chinese fictional characters confronted with such a metamorphosis can be explained by this ingrained Taoist thinking. However, this topic requires another study.

From the mythic figures recorded in antique writings to the abstract metaphysical discourses derived in Antiquity, Chinese people demonstrate a both concrete and abstract vision of imagining the universe. While they picture concrete celestial ladders such as mountains and trees as pillars that support the sky and link it to the earth, they theorize at the same time a cosmogony of Taoist metaphysics and the abstract mathematic “figures” of *Yi Jing*, in reality a binary system. The metaphysics of the four elements (water, earth, air and fire) constructs the temporal circulation of four seasons as well as the physical changes based on the pure and lighter ascending and the turbid and heavier descending. Tracing a possible way back to the supreme sky, Taoist writers and alchemists incorporate the above metaphysical tenet into their storytelling and experimental practice. If one can refine himself into a pure and light being, it is possible and quite logical to ascend to the sky. Accordingly, both theoretical and literary alchemy illustrate literal and figurative ways to heaven. Concrete figures can become abstract mathematic figures and philosophical figures; conversely, the apparently figurative ways can be concretized into literal ways to heaven. To recapitulate, the imagination of immortality and ascension to heaven is essentially grounded in the two substantial constituents: space and time. The visage of time in the Chinese imagination is not so terrifyingly devouring and falling as Durand’s theriomorphic images. It is indeed theriomorphic but is rather benedictional and ascending. Most importantly, with animalism being combined with the nyctomorphic image of the tenebrous caves, often related to lairs, the alchemical inversion of darkness and light will secure spatial and temporal passage to heaven.

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