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Fate and Immortality in Asia A Cross-cultural Perspective

edited by Donatella Rossi



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FOREWORD

The contributions contained in this Volume represent one of the outcomes of the activities linked to a research funded by Sapienza University of Rome (RM11916B45F8FE71) entitled Fate and Immortality in Asia: A Cross-cultural Perspective, a multi-disciplinary Project focused on the role played by fate in the quest for immortality and on issues related to immortality per se understood in its broadest sense.

The main Project objective was formulated to analytically investigate religious, philosophical, literary, and anthropological-psychological responses to the notions of fate and immortality—with specific reference to Ancient Mesopotamia, the Arab World, China, India, Japan, Persia, Tibet—with the intention of synergistically contextualising those responses in a comparative bridge-building framework geared towards the definition of a preliminary blueprint to be utilised for trans-disciplinary inquiries and epistemological-dialectical debates in the relevant fields. In that regard, the opportunity to publish this Volume with the prestigious Serie Orientale Roma of ISMEO – The International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies appears as a propitious step in the right direction.

Immortality represents a compelling aspect of Asian religious and philosophical concerns surrounding death and spiritual salvation. Fate and immortality-related notions and beliefs generated doctrines, liturgies, specialised procedures and praxes conceived and sanctioned according to the distinct Weltanschauung of the aforementioned geo-cultural realities. They informed salvation propositions, healing narratives, and curative methods up to the present time. They also informed mythological provenance and contributed to mold national identities and collective images of the latter. Even so, a specific research on the proposed themes had never been carried out in a systematic way, neither in terms of individual cultural spheres nor in a comprehensive or comparative mode. In order to contribute to filling such a long-standing research gap, the research methodology envisaged to fulfill the Project objectives entailed the combination of a dyadic

architecture, structured upon a historical-textual approach implying the identification, analysis, and study of ad hoc primary textual sources, and an ethno-anthropological-psychological approach based on fieldwork, interviews with knowledgeable experts in Asia, case studies involving Asian migrants in Europe.

In particular, the Project aimed to answer the following research questions: how were notions of destiny and immortality formulated and how were they developed through the course of history in the specific contexts? What are the most prominent soteriological and eschatological views connected to the achievement of immortality? What are the liturgies and praxes employed to avert death and the danger of death? Are there funerary rituals or praxes that 'grant' immortality? Are these liturgies and praxes socially accepted and diffused? Can immortality be achieved without transcending the physical body? What is the image of the liberated self and how does it relate to the mortal one in the various Asiatic cultural contexts? To which extent do theories of immortality influence healing and practices? What is the role of divination? In what way do religious experts interpret relevant textual authority and legitimate it in present-day social circumstances? Does immortality have to be proven and how could it be proven? What kind of gender dynamics intervene in constructing notions of fate and immortality? Are there specific female practitioners who play(ed) any role in that regard? Is there an ethic of immortality? Is there an aesthetic of immortality? How do notions of fate and immortality contribute to the definition of cultural and religious identities and to the nation-building process?

The involved participants were: seven scholars from the Sapienza Department of Oriental Studies (Leonardo Capezzone, Mario Casari, Michela Clemente, Filippo Lunardo, Donatella Rossi, G. Aurora Testa, Lorenzo Verderame); one from the Sapienza Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Art History, Media and Performing Arts (Flavia Cristaldi); one from the Sapienza Department of Psychology of Development and Socialisation Processes (Ankica Kusic); two from the University of Naples L'Orientale, Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies (Chiara Luna Ghidini and Carmela Simioli); one from the Institute of Sinology, Friedrich Alexander University, Erlangen-Nuremberg (Fabrizio Pregadio); and one from the Institute for the Study of Religions in Kraków, Jagiellonian University (Sacha Malgorzata).

Meanwhile, the calamitous COVID-19 pandemic broke out, so that it was impossible to implement field research in Asia within the time limits of the Project, not to mention the fact that the Project itself came to a halt for the same reason. Eventually, a workshop with round table discussion was

convened in hybrid form at Sapienza (September 2022), to which all the aforementioned Project members participated. The workshop focused on three main analytical axes: a) *Destiny, divination, and eschatology: theories of immortality in Asian thought*; b) *Approaches to long life and immortality: liturgies, techniques and practices in Asia*; c) *Ethics of long life: destiny and immortality in Asian cultural and social contexts*. Later on, a seminar on the Project topics was also organised as part of the curricular activities of the Department of Oriental Studies's Doctorate in Asian and African Civilisations, which involved the participation of eminent scholars from Norwegian, French, and Czech university institutions (March 2023). Lastly, a calligraphic exhibition was held in the Dept.'s Library featuring seven independent artists, who entertained the students and the public by offering the direct experience of creating calligraphy in various Asian scripts—Bengali, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Persian, and Tibetan—containing terms and expressions relating to Fate and Immortality (May 2023).

The eclectic collection of essays that make up this Volume is culturally articulated starting from the mythological narratives on the heroes and gods of Ancient Mesopotamia, to then embrace the Arabic and Persian literatures, climb the soteriological and alchemical peaks of the Land of Snows, face the Taoist challenges to immortality in the Middle Kingdom, savour the delicacy of a water of eternal youth and marvel at the persistent faith in the salvific power of the iconic Healing Buddha in Japan, to finally reach Europe and learn how religious sentiment and the strength of human closeness influence the well-being of immigrant ethnic populations and contributed to psychological management of the pandemic stress.

In particular, Lorenzo Verderame's article, *The Quest for Immortality and the Transience of Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, analyses anthropogenies and other literary passages to examine the concept of mortality and immortality starting from the Epic of Gilgameš and discussing the centrality of the death of Enkidu as the key event of the story which determines Gilgameš' quest for immortality.

In *Iskandar and Al-Khidr in the Literatures of Islam: Political Power, Prophecy and Divination in the Legend of the Bath of Immortality*, Mario Casari focuses on the passage from the political function of the Legend to its more spiritual and divinatory readings, highlighting an aspect of the transformation of Muslim intellectual attitudes during the classical era vis-à-vis the conceptualisation of the nature of humankind, the physical world, and their laws.

Leonardo Capezzone, in his *Medicine, Jurisprudence, Divine Inspiration: Marginal Notes on the Knowledge of the Shiite Imams*, analyses the concept of authority of the spiritual leader—the Imam descending from the

Prophet Muhammad—centred on a charismatic kind of knowledge that gave prominence to the figure of the Imam, in order to contextualise the conception of knowledge/power by investigating the persistence of non-Islamic ideas in early Shiite religious culture.

Michela Clemente's Immortality through Relics in Tibetan Hagiographies: The Case of Lha bTsun Rin Chen rNam rgyal (1473-1557) analyses immortality through the hagiographies of the Tibetan master lHa btsun Rin chen rNam rgyal (1473-1557) and discusses the cult of relics, which are venerated because they encapsulate both the spiritual power and the memory of deceased masters.

Filippo Lunardo's rJe tshe 'Dzin ma, A dGe lugs pa Long Life Practice, explores the relationship between that specific tantric instruction and its figurative symbols to prove its efficacy, in terms of transformative powers, towards the attainment of spiritual salvation.

Carmela Simioli, with The Multidimensional Nature of the Mercury Procedures as Described in the Ten Million of Quintessential Instructions, The Relics (man ngag bye ba ring bsrel) of Zur mkhar ba mNyam nyid rDo rje, analyses those instructions, which describe the entire process devoted to both the obtainment of the mercurial panacea for the realisation of an extraordinary body and the achievement of ultimate liberation.

Donatella Rossi's Today as Yesterday: A Spiritual Advice for the Degenerate Age, presents the translation and analysis of a short bon-po text containing a prophetic revelation, proposing emic and comparative reflections as complements to the research motifs of the Project.

Destiny and Immortality in Taoism, by Fabrizio Pregadio, surveys some of the principal themes related to the subject matter and the way in which notions of fate and immortality are variously conceived in Taoism.

In Under the Spell of Antiquity: Orikuchi Shinobu and the Water of Eternal Youth, Chiara L. Ghidini investigates how the Japanese writer and folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) employed the theme of water to deliver his own version of antiquity and offer an alternative fate for twentieth-century Japan.

G. Aurora Testa, in her The Jingoji Yakushi and the Production of Wooden Images of Bhaiṣajyaguru (the Healing Buddha) in Japan during the Late Nara (710-794) and Early Heian (794-1185) Periods, re-examines a series of wooden sculptures of the Medicine Buddha (Jap. Yakushi Nyorai, Skrt. Bhaiṣajyaguru) to investigate the religious and cultural role of Buddhist images during the Heian Period.

Flavia Cristaldi's article, Places of Worship of the Chinese Population in Rome as an Indicator of Territorial Stabilisation, examines the places of worship frequented by Chinese citizens residing in Rome, highlighting their

location within the urban space and their main functional characteristics as indicators of the Chinese community territorial stabilisation in Italy.

The collection of essays ends with the scientific contribution of Ankica Kosic and Amy L. Ai, Spirituality and Psychological Stress in Covid Pandemic of Chinese Immigrants in Europe, whose rich content explores whether beliefs in spiritual support and in the immortality of the soul may have moderated the relationship between the concern about Covid-19 and relevant psychological distress.

It is hoped that the Volume will contribute to fueling interest in the topics covered and that it will be a stimulus for further in-depth studies and academic discourse.

Rome, October 28th, 2023

DONATELLA ROSSI
Editor

DESTINY AND IMMORTALITY IN TAOISM

FABRIZIO PREGADIO

In Taoism as a whole, there is not a single view of destiny and there is not a single view of immortality. This contribution surveys some of the main points related to the subject of destiny and immortality, and a few of the senses in which the concepts of “destiny” (*ming* 命) and “immortality” (*xian* 仙) are understood in different branches of Taoism.

In one of the works ascribed to him, Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾, who probably lived a short earthly existence (1194-1229?) but is one of the main figures in the history of Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy, reports a conversation with his master. One evening, he says, both were sitting under a pine tree on a mountain cliff; “the wind was clear and the moon was bright, the night was calm and the air was cool.” Bai Yuchan bowed down twice, and politely asked master Chen Niwan 陳泥丸: “I have not been your disciple for a long time, and I reckon that my fortune and destiny are flimsy and shallow. Yet, I dare ask you: Is my destiny to become immortal in this life?” Chen Niwan replied: “Anyone can do it, and this is even more true of you.” Then Chen Niwan gave teachings on the different levels of practice and accomplishment in Neidan.¹

Chen Niwan’s answer may be seen as a reflection of the predominant view on destiny and immortality in Taoism: immortality does not depend on destiny, and anyone can become an immortal independently of the circumstances of his or her worldly life. However, in Taoism as a whole, there is not a single view of destiny and there is not a single view of immortality.

¹ “Xiuxian bianhuo lun” 修仙辨惑論 (Essay on Resolving Doubts in the Cultivation of Immortality), in *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 (Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality; DZ 263), 4. 1a-b. The essay is translated in Pregadio 2019: 110-117.

This contribution surveys some of the main points related to this subject, and a few of the senses in which the concepts of “destiny” (*ming* 命) and “immortality” (*xian* 仙) are understood in different branches of Taoism.

GE HONG’S DETERMINISM

In the “Inner Chapters” of his *Baopu zi* 抱朴子 (Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature), Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343) provides an invaluable overview of doctrines, practices and beliefs prevalent at his time in Jiangnan 江南, a broad region South of the lower Yangzi river. His survey is interspersed among personal reflections on several subjects, often presented in the shape of conversations with an imaginary Confucian interlocutor.

In one of those conversations, Ge Hong tries to demonstrate that seeking transcendence depends—just like any other human undertaking—on destiny. In his strongly deterministic view, destiny is received as a “natural endowment” at the time of conception:

按仙經以為諸得仙者，皆其受命偶值神仙之氣，自然所稟。故胞胎之中，已含信道之性。

According to the books of the immortals, all those who attain immortality happen by destiny to be in conjunction (*zhi*) with the *qi* of divine immortality; this is their natural endowment. Therefore, when they are in the womb, they already harbor by nature their faith in the Dao.²

Quoting an earlier, now-lost work, Ge Hong adds:

人之吉凶，制在結胎受氣之日，皆上得列宿之精。其值聖宿則聖，值賢宿則賢，值文宿則文，值武宿則武，值貴宿則貴，值富宿則富，值賤宿則賤，值貧宿則貧，值壽宿則壽，值仙宿則仙。

A person’s good or bad fortune is set on the day the embryo is formed and receives its *qi*: everyone receives the essence (*jing*) of an asterism above. If one happens to be in conjunction with the sagehood asterism, one becomes a sage; with the worthiness asterism, a worthy; with the civil asterism, a person of the civil arts; with the military asterism, a person of the military arts; with the honors asterism, an honored person; with the riches asterism, a rich person; with the humbleness asterism, a humble person; with the poverty asterism, a poor person; with the longevity asterism, a person of long life; with the immortality asterism, an immortal.³

² *Baopu zi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (ed. Wang 1985), 16.226; see also Ware 1966: 203; Che 1999: 160.

³ *Baopu zi neipian*, 12.225-226, quoting the *Yujian jing* 玉鈐經 (Book of the Jade Seal); see also Ware 1966: 202-203; Che 1999: 159-160.

For Ge Hong, here lies the meaning of the “mandate of Heaven” (*tian-ming* 天命) with regard to individual existence: having said that even ordinary people can attain immortality if such is their destiny, he asks his interlocutor, “Could you say that this is not caused by the mandate of Heaven?”⁴ However, Heaven according to Ge Hong does not bestow individual destinies on the basis of deliberate intent. Heaven is an impersonal power that merely supervises the mechanism of “conjunction” between the instant of conception and a particular star:

命之脩短，實由所值，受氣結胎，各有星宿。天道無為，任物自然。... 所樂善否，判於所稟，移易予奪，非天所能。

Whether one is destined to a long or a short life is actually owed to a conjunction (*zhi*): on receiving *qi* and taking form as an embryo, everyone is related to an asterism. The Way of Heaven does nothing (*wuwei*): it leaves everything to the nature of each creature [...] One’s preferences are determined by one’s endowment; Heaven can neither change it nor transform it, neither add to it nor subtract from it.⁵

The destiny of becoming an immortal should be fulfilled through the performance of appropriate practices. According to Ge Hong, encountering a master who teaches those practices would “definitely” or “necessarily” (*bi* 必) occur to one who is so destined. Otherwise, “even if one seeks, one will not obtain” the necessary methods.⁶ Ge Hong even adds that Mount Taihua 太華 is littered with the bones of those who tried to “enter the mountain” (*rushan* 入山) and seek immortality without knowing the proper methods.⁷

Ge Hong’s discourse is inspired by earlier Confucian determinism, and bears partial analogies with the views of Wang Chong 王充 (27-ca. 97 CE), a thinker who, two and a half centuries before him, had already maintained that destiny is received at birth or even at the embryonic stage.⁸ At the same time, the context of Ge Hong’s discourse should not be neglected. The “Inner Chapters” of his work reflect the expansion of the literati’s interests of his time towards subjects that broadened the focus of earlier Confucianism, and included what Lai Chi-tim has called enquiries “into the transcendent and eternal realm beyond the natural world.” In this context, Ge Hong aims to show that sagehood cannot be limited to what is written in the Con-

⁴ *Baopu zi neipian*, 12.226 (此豈非天命之所使然乎?); see also Ware 1966: 204; Che 1999: 161.

⁵ *Baopu zi neipian*, 7.136; see also Ware 1966: 124; Che 1999: 107.

⁶ *Baopu zi neipian*, 12.226; see also Ware 1966: 203; Che 1999: 160.

⁷ *Baopu zi neipian*, 17.299; see also Ware 1966: 279.

⁸ On Wang Chong’s view of destiny see Kalinowski 2011: lxxv-lxxxviii.

fucian classics.⁹ Having recourse to the “mandate of Heaven” was probably the only way for him to convince his canonical Confucian opponent that seeking immortality—and performing the practices to attain it—were, at least for some people, legitimate pursuits as they depended on destiny.

“MY DESTINY IS IN ME, IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN”

Due to the renown of its author and the ease of access to his work—available in several editions outside the *Daozang* 道藏 (Taoist Canon) and fully or partially translated into several Western languages—Ge Hong’s idea that immortality is fated has become the best-known Taoist view on this subject. While this is definitely not the dominant view of destiny within Taoism as a whole, two points in Ge Hong’s discourse deserve attention. First, as we shall see, the idea that destiny is received at the embryonic stage played an important role in later Taoist meditation practices and in Neidan, where generating and delivering an inner embryo is often described as the achievement of the whole alchemical work. Second, somehow incongruously with his own views, Ge Hong’s work contains the first extant instance of the famous statement, “my destiny is in me, it is not in Heaven” (*wo ming zai wo bu zai tian* 我命在我不在天), which he reports from another lost text, and which continued to run as a leitmotif in later Taoist views of destiny.¹⁰

Countering the claim that not only the attainment of immortality but everything in life is fated, this terse but powerful statement grants much scope to human agency and self-determination. Destiny may or may not be given in the first place by Heaven or by another non-human entity, but this is not the main point: responsibility and control of one’s life lies with the individual. One of the grounds that makes this view possible is the fact that Taoism replaces Heaven—as a personal or impersonal power that rules over human beings—with its own deities, none of which is deemed to dispense destinies in an arbitrary way. As his name also implies, the main deity related to destiny, the Administrator of Destinies (Siming 司命, originally a god of popular religion), is nothing but a high-ranking bureaucrat who manages the so-called “registers of life and death.” Equally relevant may be the Taoist principle of the “return to the Dao” (*huandao* 還道, *fandao* 返道) and to the original state of being, including the “return to the mandate”

⁹ See Lai 1988: 186-192; Puett 2007, especially pp. 102-104 on the figure of the sage; and the introduction and conclusions in Pregadio 2020.

¹⁰ *Baopu zi neipian*, 16.289; see also Ware 1966: 269.

(*fuming* 復命) or to one's "original destiny" before the circumstances of ordinary life begin to unfold. For these and other reasons, Taoists have seen themselves capable of taking charge of their own destinies, and of changing their destinies.

In the history of Taoism, there have been three main ways of dealing with destiny: through morality, through ritual, and through the creation of a new identity. These three ways are not mutually exclusive but, for the sake of clarity, I will discuss them separately.

Morality

Morality is always fundamental and is one of the basics of self-cultivation. Among a large number of possible examples, I will mention only one, found in the *Taiping jing* 太平經 or *Book of Great Peace*, a major work originally dating from the second century CE. In our present context, this work is especially renowned for its theory of the "inherited burden" (*chengfu* 承負), which has a dual foundation. First, personal destiny is determined by the faults and transgressions committed by one's ancestors up to the seventh or the ninth generation. At the same time, the *Book of Great Peace* places individual destinies in the broader context of a progressive deterioration from "high antiquity" (*shanggu* 上古) to "low antiquity" (*xiagu* 下古) and to contemporary times. It is because of this decay that the individual suffers as a result of the faults of the ancestors. As destiny is determined by date of birth, Heaven causes us to be born on a certain day, in accordance with the "inherited burden", and, after birth, destiny is administered by the Bureau of Fate (*mingcao* 命曹).¹¹

As part of its broad salvific message, the *Book of Great Peace* intends to teach ways to neutralize the "inherited burden;" in other words, to change one's destiny. These ways are morality and self-cultivation. An immaculate moral behavior may enable one to overcome the "burden" received as long as one is able to acquire a merit considerably greater than the ancestors' faults:

能行大功萬萬倍之，先人雖有餘殃，不能及此人也。

If one could achieve a great merit, tens and tens of thousands times greater [than the offenses committed by their ancestors], even though there were surplus evils left over by the ancestors, they would not come upon that person.¹²

¹¹ On the views of destiny in the *Book of Great Peace* see Hendrischke 1991, 2014, 2017, and Lo 2010: 321-326.

¹² *Taiping jing* (ed. Wang 1960), 18-34.22; trans. Lo 2010: 325, slightly modified.

The second, but parallel, way is self-cultivation:

見善興從事，見惡退止，日夜剋躬思省，所負既復。

Observing how good people thrive in their activities while those who are evil are brought to a halt, day and night we discipline ourselves and undertake self-reflection. The burden we carry may be taken off.¹³

In particular, one should practice “utmost sincerity” (*zhicheng* 至誠), which the *Book of Great Peace* defines in one passage as taking the “way (*dao* 道) of Heaven” and the “virtue (*de* 德) of Earth” as behavioral models:

名為至誠，乃言其上視天而行，象天道可為；俯視地而行，象地德而移。

What we call utmost sincerity means that we look up to Heaven and act by emulating the workings of its Way, and that we look down to Earth and act by emulating the movements of its Virtue.¹⁴

The “inherited burden” theory of the *Book of Great Peace* never became dominant in Taoism as a whole and only occasionally re-emerges in later texts. One of the likely reasons for its waning was the spread of Buddhism and its concept of karma. Chinese Buddhists disapproved of the view of a destiny that is not only inherited from one’s ancestors but also invests entire generations. In the Buddhist view, destiny does not depend on our predecessors, on astral conjunctions or on Heaven, but is entirely our own responsibility—even though the agent responsible may be one of our own previous transmigrations. Should that not suffice, suggesting that our ancestors are the reason for our troubles would amount, in the Buddhist view, to a lack of filial piety: if anything, our ancestors should benefit from the merit acquired through our practice.¹⁵

Ritual Practices

Morality is also fundamental in the second way of dealing with destiny, namely the ritual practices devised in the second century CE by the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao 天師道, one of the main branches of Taoism until the present day). These practices required the intermediation of a priest qualified to communicate with the divine beings that manage the

¹³ *Taiping jing*, 110.526 (reading *xing* 興 for *yu* 與); trans. Hendrischke 2017: 199, slightly modified.

¹⁴ *Taiping jing*, 96.426; trans. Hendrischke 2017: 156, slightly modified.

¹⁵ On the Buddhist response to the “inherited burden” theory see Zürcher 2013: 153-159.

mechanism of retribution. With few exceptions, illness and other misfortunes were supposed to be caused by one's own transgressions and sins; in other words, they were not the fault of the ancestors, but depended on the faults of the individual. Accordingly, the healing ritual required confession of sins, repentance, and the dispatch of a "petition" (*zhang* 章) with a request of pardon to the offices of Heaven, Earth and Water, the three main deities of the early Celestial Masters.¹⁶

This ritual-bureaucratic procedure was expanded during the Six Dynasties (third-sixth centuries) with the creation of a complex system that, as Franciscus Verellen has recently shown, takes into account liability, retribution, redemption, and release. One may incur liability for one's own faults, for someone else's faults or even by coincidence, such as accidental exposure to "miasmas" (*zhu* 注) or "malignant *qi*" (*xieqi* 邪氣). The mechanism of retribution follows precise rules, resulting in adversities, suffering, illness, reduction of life span, and premature death. Redemption occurs by means of confession of sins, offering of pledges, prayer, recitation of scriptures, purification, and, typically, again requires sending "petitions." This procedure was expected to result in pardon and release from one's predicament.¹⁷

CREATION OF A NEW PERSONA

While neither the *Book of Great Peace*, with its emphasis on morality, nor the Celestial Masters, with their healing rituals, intended to make people "immortal," they both represent exemplary methods of coping with destiny and, especially, changing destiny. This intent is even more visible in the third way of dealing with destiny in Taoism. As this way is directly related to the attainment of immortality, a few words may be useful to place this subject in its context.¹⁸

"Immortality"

Taoist hagiographic works and other sources mention an uncountable number of "immortals." According to these works, immortals are historical, semi-historical or legendary persons who transcend the limits of ordinary

¹⁶ See Kleeman 2016: 353-69; Verellen 2019: 70-97; Lai 2010.

¹⁷ See Verellen 2019: 8-12 and *passim*.

¹⁸ The following three subsections summarize portions of Pregadio 2018.

human existence. In addition to several other faculties—including the possession of bodies devoid of signs of aging, the gift of healing, and the power of predicting the future—the main power possessed by immortals is the ability to reach an indefinitely long lifespan.¹⁹

With the exception of those devoted to a single deity (in particular, Laozi 老子 in his divine aspect), hagiographic works contain exemplary stories about men and women who have risen to a realized or a saintly state (but not a “godlike” state: immortals are not gods).²⁰ These accounts often reflect oral traditions and are related to local cults, but the works that collect them were as a rule composed by literati, including some who had not much to do with Taoism per se but were interested in the preservation of local lore, if not simply in the unusual and the “strange.” Even more important, hagiographic works were intended for open circulation and were not the object of transmission among initiated or ordained Taoists.

A different picture emerges when we look at sources belonging to the traditions that evolved during the history of Taoism. These sources show that Taoist adepts do not intend to reach immortality in their physical body (*ti* 體); they intend, instead, to use their “bodily form” (*xing* 形) in order to generate a new person (*shen* 身) not subject to death.

Release from the Mortal Body

Works dating from between the second and the sixth centuries—before the increased influence of Buddhism on self-cultivation practices and before the emergence of Internal Alchemy—describe, among others, two main ways to attain immortality. The first way is “release from the mortal body” (*shijie* 尸解), a practice through which one “simulates death” (*tuosi* 託死), sheds one’s ordinary body and takes on a different body which preserves itself for an indefinite amount of time until one can finally “ascend to Heaven.”²¹ Different versions of this practice have existed but, on the basis of Taoist hagiography, the main points can be summarized as follows: (1) The adept goes through a “simulated death.” (2) His corpse, either on his deathbed or in his tomb, is found to have been replaced by different ob-

¹⁹ See Penny 2000.

²⁰ In a religious culture such as that of China, the boundaries between “immortality” and “divinity” are admittedly tenuous. Nevertheless, few immortals have risen to the rank of gods in the proper sense; one of the few examples that comes to mind is Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, later divinized as Fuyou dijun 孚佑帝君 and under several other names.

²¹ On *shijie* see Robinet 1979: 57-66; Seidel 1987: 230-232; Cedzich 2001; Campany 2002: 52-60.

jects—typically a sword, a staff or a pair of sandals. (3) Having released himself from his mortal body, the adept changes his name. (4) He never goes back to where he came from; instead, he usually retires on a mountain, but sometimes lives among other people or even “in the city market.”

Several aspects of this practice admittedly remain unclear. However, beyond hagiographic accounts, a rare description of how “release from the mortal body” occurred as a Taoist practice is found in a major source dating, in its original form, from the late third century. After he ingests the Medicine for the Release from the Mortal Body (*shijie yao* 尸解藥) and draws the talisman of the Great Mystery of Living Unseen (*Taixuan yinsheng zhi fu* 太玄陰生之符), the adept visualizes himself as “being dead.” Then he takes off his clothes, changes his name, and enters the mountains, never to go back to where he was born or had lived:

服尸解藥，日數足，即作此符，丹書白素，以置（復）〔腹〕前，以戊己日西首卧，思念自作死人。良久，解衣留所卧處，徑去入山。若之遠方，易姓名，勿還故鄉。其初去時，人見其卧處有死人尸，久乃忽然不知尸所在也。

After you have ingested the Medicine for the Release from the Mortal Body for the prescribed number of days, write the talisman in red on white silk, and place it on your belly. On a *wu* or *ji* day, lie down, your head pointing towards the west, and visualize (*or*: meditate on) yourself as being dead. After quite some time, take off your clothes, leave them where you had lain, and walk straight to enter the mountains. When you are far away, change your name, and never return to your hometown. Right after you have left, people will find that where you had lain there is a corpse. But suddenly, after a while, no one will know where your corpse is to be found.²²

Among other points that deserve attention in this passage is the change of name. As suggested by Robert Campany, this is meant to elude the spirits who, working on behalf of the Administrator of Destinies, are charged with enacting the decrees of the “registers of life and death”: deceived by the change of name, the spirits would be unable to locate that person and cause his death.²³ At the same time, it is significant that the expression “changing name” (*yi xingming* 異姓名) is equivalent to “changing destiny” (*gaiming* 改命, also homophonous of the more common *gaiming* 改名). The change

²² *Lingbao wufu xu* 靈寶五符序 (Explanation of the Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure; DZ 388), 2.25a-b; trans. based on Cedzich 2001: 28, modified. In the system of the five agents (*wuxing* 五行), the *wu* 戊 and *ji* 己 days are related to Soil, and therefore symbolically represent the center of the cosmos. The text does not explain why the adept should lie with his head pointing towards the West; there might be an indirect allusion to the Queen Mother of the West (*Xiwangmu* 西王母), the goddess of the immortals in early Chinese religion and in Taoism.

²³ Campany 2002: 58-59.

of name therefore not only intends to cheat the spirits but is also analogous to the meditational and ritual act of “taking off the clothes”: one discards one’s old persona and replaces it with another one, generated by oneself. This new inner persona then becomes the center of one’s practice.

Untying the Nodes of Death

The second way of creating a new immortal person consists in generating an inner embryo that is unaffected by death. An important example is the practice of “untying the knots” (*jiejie* 解結), belonging to the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) school of Taoism, which developed from the second half of the fourth century. Here the adept performs a complex meditation practice that lasts one year, through which he conceives an “immortal embryo.” Significantly, in the light of what we have seen above, this practice should begin on the anniversary not of the adept’s birth, but of his conception. During the first nine months, each of his inner organs is turned into gold or jade. In the last three months, he visualizes the Original Mother (Yuanmu 元母) in his lower Cinnabar Field and the Original Father (Yuanfu 元父) in his upper Cinnabar Field. When their Breaths (*qi*) conjoin in his middle Cinnabar Field, they generate an inner immortal body.²⁴

Here again, the conception of the embryo is closely related to the Taoist idea of “changing destiny.” In Chinese physiognomy (*xiangshu* 相術), bones are seen as the main bodily feature related to destiny. In the method summarized above, the bones of the newly generated embryo begin to be formed in the second month of gestation. It is also in that month that the deities take note of the destiny of the embryo, in other words, of the adept’s changed destiny as an immortal.²⁵

DESTINY IN INTERNAL ALCHEMY

Notwithstanding their obvious differences, “release from the mortal body” and “untying the knots” share a fundamental point: the shift of focus from the ordinary person to a different person, another identity unaffected by the destiny of its creator—and in fact unaffected by destiny at all.

²⁴ This practice is more complex than my summary might suggest. See Robinet 1993: 139-143, and Bokenkamp 2005: 158-162.

²⁵ On this point, see Bokenkamp 2005: 160.

The Shangqing school of Taoism, in whose context the practice of “untying the knots” was created, is commonly regarded as the main precursor of Neidan, or Internal Alchemy, which, as far as we know, developed from around 700 CE. With regard to Neidan, the main legacy of Shangqing is the idea that adepts should retrace their embryonic development not in order to “return to the mother’s womb,” but vice versa to give birth to an immortal being: one generates an “immortal at the embryonic stage” (*taixian* 胎仙) that represents one’s own “true self” (*zhenwu* 真吾, *zhenwo* 真我).²⁶ Even though Neidan practices are framed and formulated in remarkably different ways compared to Shangqing, this aspect remains fundamentally unaltered. In addition, Neidan preserves features of the “release from the mortal body,” although only in an emblematic sense: in the last stage (or one of the last stages) of the practice, the alchemical embryo is “delivered” (*tuotai* 脫胎, the same term used for the birth of a human child) and leaves the body of its creator. In these new forms of practice, the earlier Taoist views of destiny continue to play a fundamental role, but Neidan recasts them in new ways—as it often does when it incorporates portions of older or different traditions. In order to appreciate the Neidan view of destiny and its relationship with immortality, we need to look first at some aspects of this new doctrinal landscape.

The Dyad Nature-Destiny

The view of destiny in Neidan cannot be considered on its own: in its way of seeing, destiny is inseparable from another concept, *xing* 性 or “human nature.” Both concepts, and their relationship, acquire a remarkable level of complexity and depth in Neidan, which I will briefly survey here.²⁷

In the Neidan view, all human beings possess the same “fundamental nature” (*benxing* 本性), which is above individuality (some Neidan masters, however, emphasize that human nature actually has two aspects, a point to which I will return). Destiny, by contrast, is strictly individual: two or more persons may share parts or aspects of their destinies but, as long as destiny defines the entire sequence of events that happen in one’s life, each individual differs from the others. Yet, the term *ming* 命 in Neidan has a broader sense than “destiny” in the ordinary sense. Far from denoting a fate allotted

²⁶ In fact, Shangqing, in turn, inherited earlier Taoist practices that had the same purpose. See Pregadio 2006, especially pp. 126-141. On the concept of “embryo” in Neidan, see Despeux 2016.

²⁷ On the views of human nature and destiny in Neidan see Robinet 1995: 165-195 and Pregadio 2014. Among the large number of studies by Chinese scholars who, unlike their colleagues elsewhere, have paid much attention to this subject, see especially Ge 2009.

by a supernatural entity, it does not even refer to the events that occur (or do not) during a lifetime, but defines in the first place a person's individual existence or embodiment. That said, in order to avoid unnecessary complications, I will continue to use the term "destiny" to refer to *ming*, even though "existence" would be more appropriate with regard to Neidan.

In Neidan, inner nature and destiny are deemed to be originally a single principle or two aspects of the same principle: while they are still conjoined in the precelestial state (*xiantian* 先天), their separation occurs in the postcelestial domain (*houtian* 後天). Nature and destiny therefore are seen as the two main poles of the human being, complementary and indispensable to one another. In addition, nature and destiny are closely related to the mind (*xin* 心) and the body (*shen* 身) and to the three main components of the human being and the whole cosmos, Essence, Breath and Spirit (*jing* 精, *qi* 氣, and *shen* 神). Nature pertains to Spirit and to the mind, and destiny pertains to Breath and Essence and to the body. Different authors of Neidan works, however, have different views on what "mind" and "body" mean in this context. For those who raise this issue, the difference consists in whether nature and destiny are related to the precelestial or the postcelestial mind and body, and to the precelestial or postcelestial Essence, Breath and Spirit.²⁸

Being the two main poles of the human being, human nature and destiny are also the two main poles of the self-cultivation practice. To mention a few examples, different Neidan authors have called them "the roots of self-cultivation," "the secret of the Golden Elixir," "the essentials for refining the Elixir," and "the learning of the divine immortals."²⁹ Accordingly, virtually all Neidan works insist that both nature and destiny should be cultivated. There are important differences among the various branches and lineages of Neidan with regard to which between nature and destiny should be cultivated first, but those differences essentially concern which one is the key to cultivating the other. The so-called "conjoined cultivation of nature and destiny" (*xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修) is one of the points on which virtually all Neidan works agree.

Buddhist and Neo-Confucian Debates

The Neidan discussion of nature and destiny also shows evident traces of earlier debates in other spheres of Chinese thought and religion. Bud-

²⁸ For an example, see the passages from Li Daochun's 李道純 (fl. 1288-1306) work discussed in Pregadio 2014: 178-180.

²⁹ For references, see Pregadio 2016: 159-160.

dhism again played a major role in those debates, although one might say that it did so as a consequence of the importance of the concepts of human nature and the mind in the earlier Chinese tradition, beginning at least with Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) in the fourth century BCE.³⁰

The Chinese Buddhists' indebtedness and contribution to those debates became clear when, at least from the sixth century CE, they made the doctrine of the buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性) a central point of their views. As Buddhist scholars have often noticed, the buddha-nature was not a major concern in either Indian or Tibetan Buddhism, but became a fundamental subject in Chinese and, later, in Japanese Buddhism. To summarize one of the main formulations of this view, every human being is deemed to possess the buddha-nature and therefore to be fundamentally awakened, but the awareness of that nature is obscured by the ordinary mind. There is actually only "one mind" (*yixin* 一心), but it has two aspects or modes (*ermen* 二門, lit., "two gates"): an innately awakened one, which gives access to the buddha-nature and is ultimately equivalent to it, and another mode, characterized by ignorance and delusion, which is the only obstacle to the awakening. The obstacle itself, however, is an illusion generated by the deluded mind.³¹

The concept of an innately awakened nature had a substantial impact not only on the development of Chinese Buddhism, but also on Taoist thought during the Tang period (seventh to ninth centuries).³² Confucians, instead, could hardly accept it, as the concept of a mind already awakened, and only waiting to be liberated from self-deception in order to be able to manifest itself, challenged the function of Confucian moral education at the root.³³ In Confucianism, on the other hand, a new view appeared, originated by Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-77) and later praised and accepted by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the main Neo-Confucian thinker. Zhang Zai is the creator of the concept of *qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性, approximately meaning "material nature" but denoting more precisely one's exterior character, temperament,

³⁰ On Mencius' view of human nature, see Bloom 1994.

³¹ The first major work to present this view is the *Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論 (Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith); see Hakeda 2006: 38-51. For Indian antecedents, see Zimmermann 2002 and Jones 2021.

³² On the developments of this debate in the Chongxuan 重玄 (Double Mystery) school of thought see Assandri 2021.

³³ In addition, while human nature according to Confucians contains the seeds of the ethical virtues, which should be brought to fruition through education and moral self-cultivation (this is Mencius' view), the buddha-nature is characterized by "emptiness" (*xu* 虛, or *kong* 空): absence not only of desires and emotions, but also of ordinary thought processes. Those processes are produced by the *shishen* 識神 or "cognitive spirit," which, according to at least some Chinese Buddhists, is the root of transmigration (on the latter point, see Radich 2016). This was another major obstacle for the acceptance of the Buddhist doctrine by Confucians and Neo-Confucians.

or personality, as distinct from the morally flawless “nature endowed by Heaven” (*tian suo xing* 天所性) or “nature of Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi zhi xing* 天地之性). Somehow similar to the buddha-nature, which is never truly obscured by the ordinary mind, the nature endowed by Heaven is never truly obscured by the “material nature.” Parallel to this, Zhang Zai maintains that there is a primal destiny endowed by Heaven, which is never damaged by the alterations of ordinary destiny.³⁴

True and False Nature and Destiny

The above brief survey of the earlier debates may help to appreciate one of the most important and elaborate Neidan views of human nature and destiny, and their relationship with “immortality.” Its creator, Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734-1821), is widely acknowledged as one of the main representatives of this tradition and as the author of one of the most extensive doctrinal expositions in its history.

With regard to our subject, Liu Yiming begins by saying that human nature has two aspects: one of them is received directly from Heaven and is the same for every human being, while the other is the “material nature” (the concept and term created by Zhang Zai). Destiny also has two aspects: ordinary destiny and a destiny called by Liu Yiming the “destiny of the Breath of Dao” (*daoqi zhi ming* 道氣之命). The nature bestowed by Heaven is distinguished by “innate knowledge and innate capacity” (*liangzhi liangneng* 良知良能, two terms derived from Mencius). Individual character, on the other hand, varies because of differences in the purity or impurity of the endowed *qi*. Analogously, individual destiny differs in terms of longevity, wealth and honor, or their opposites. The destiny that is the Breath of the Dao, however, “is firm and strong, pure and flawless”; it is unrelated to ordinary destiny and is unaffected by the fluctuations of Yin and Yang.

According to Liu Yiming, the nature bestowed by Heaven and the “destiny of the Breath of the Dao” are true (*zhen* 真), while the individual personality and ordinary destiny are false (*jia* 假). What distinguishes the “true” and the “false” from one another is the fact that the true nature and destiny pertain to the precelestial domain and are not therefore affected by Yin and Yang, while the false nature and destiny pertain to the postcelestial domain and are subject to the alterations of Yin and Yang. Finally, and most

³⁴ On Zhang Zai’s views see Wang and Ding 2010: 50-53.

importantly, Liu Yiming says that by cultivating the nature bestowed by Heaven one can transform one's "material nature," and by cultivating the "destiny of the Breath of the Dao" one can change the course of ordinary destiny (*zhuan tianshu zhi ming* 轉天數之命). Those who do this, he concludes, realize "the Way of Nature and Destiny."³⁵

The Taoist idea of "changing destiny" returns therefore with Liu Yiming, even though it is embedded in a doctrinal framework quite different from those examined earlier. In his discourse, he draws concepts and formulations from Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, but incorporates them into his view of the foundations and function of Neidan. While several points would deserve attention, I will restrict myself to two remarks. First, the "nature bestowed by Heaven" is, according to Zhang Zai, the mind containing the seeds of morality, in a Confucian sense; according to Liu Yiming, on the other hand, it is the Original Spirit (*yuanshen* 元神), which precedes the emergence of the "thinking spirit" (*silü shen* 思慮神), the cognitive spirit (*shishen* 識神) and various features of the ordinary mind, including desires and attachments. The second remark concerns the "Breath of the Dao" (*daoqi* 道氣), undoubtedly the most complex feature in the passage summarized above. This term refers to *ming* as one's embodiment (that is to say, not to destiny per se, but to one's embodiment as the foundation of one's "destiny"). Liu Yiming emphasizes that one's embodiment occurs in the first place—even before one's birth—within the One Breath (*yiqi* 一氣) of the Dao. As it is not manifested in space and time, this formless embodiment, he says, "preserves itself for numberless eons," and from its perspective "life and death are equal." Only secondarily does this precelestial embodiment manifest itself as one's physical body, subject to birth and death and to a particular "destiny" and life span; and only under this second aspect does *ming* become "destiny," related to length of life and to the events that occur in one's lifetime.

THE YANG SPIRIT AND THE IMMORTAL BODY

The precelestial body generated by the Breath of the Dao is one's own true immortal body. As a Neidan master, Liu Yiming formulates this view with regard to the self-cultivation practice, which should lead to the recovery or, in a quite literal sense, the re-generation of that body.

³⁵ *Xiuzhen houbian* 修真後辨 (Further Discriminations in the Cultivation of Reality; repr. in *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書, vol. 8), 8a. A translation of the passage summarized above is found in Pregadio 2013: 43-44. *Tianshu zhi ming* (lit., "destiny of Heaven's cipher") refers to the allotment of *qi* that determines not only one's life span, but also one's destiny as a whole.

As we have seen, inner nature and destiny are broadly related to the mind and the body, respectively, and Liu Yiming distinguishes a “true” and a “false” aspect for each of them. The same distinction applies to mind and body. In a passage—of which I only quote the essential points—he says:

今人皆曰身心，只知幻化之身心，而不知真正之身心。... 幻化之身，肉身也；幻化之心，人心也。... 至於真正之身，法身也；真正之心，天心也。... 此法身天心，人多不識，所以法身埋沒，幻身用事；天心退位，人心當權。

People nowadays speak of the body and the mind, but they only know the illusory body and mind, and do not know the true body and mind [...] The illusory body is the body of flesh; the illusory mind is the human mind [...] As for the true body and the true mind, they are the dharma-body and the celestial mind [...] Most people are not aware of this dharma-body and this celestial mind. Thus the dharma-body is buried and the illusory body takes charge, the celestial mind retires from its position and the human mind takes power.³⁶

While the term “celestial mind” (*tianxin* 天心) belongs to the Chinese tradition as a whole (it appears first in the *Shujing* 書經 or *Book of Documents*), “dharma-body” (*fashen* 法身, *dharmakāya*) is another expression derived from Buddhism: in one of its main meanings, which applies to Neidan, it denotes the unmanifested body of the Buddha, not subject to birth and death and therefore, by its very nature, “immortal.” Several Neidan masters, including Liu Yiming, apply this term to the precelestial body of each individual; they regard the dharma-body to be the “immortal body” newly attained through Neidan, and to be equivalent to the alchemical embryo delivered at the end of the practice.

Liu Yiming arranges the Neidan practice into two main stages. The first stage focuses on the cultivation of destiny and is concluded with the attainment of the External Medicine (*waiyao* 外藥); the second focuses on the cultivation of inner nature and is concluded with the attainment of the Internal Medicine (*neiyao* 內藥). These two “medicines” enable the conception and the delivery of the alchemical embryo, respectively: “By means of the External Medicine you coagulate the embryo; by means of the Internal Medicine you deliver the embryo.”³⁷ Between the conception and the delivery of his inner embryo, the practitioner devotes himself to its gestation, which lasts ten metaphoric months (the same time required for the gestation

³⁶ *Xiuzhen houbian*, 8a; trans. in Pregadio 2013: 39-40.

³⁷ *Xiuzhen biannan* 修真辨難 (Discriminations in the Cultivation of Reality; repr. in *Zangwai daoshu*, vol. 8), 12a-b; trans. in Pregadio 2019: 246.

of a human embryo according to the Chinese reckoning). As Liu Yiming says, “in ten months, the embryo is complete: like a fruit that ripens and falls to the ground, you deliver your dharma-body.”³⁸

The alchemical embryo, therefore, is equivalent to the immortal dharma-body or the “true body” of the practitioner, an embodiment—if one may still use this word—of the “destiny of the Breath of the Dao,” unconcerned by and immune to the destiny of its creator. Liu Yiming and many other Neidan masters refer to the delivered embryo as “a body outside the body” (*shen zhi wai shen* 身之外身) and also call it the Yang Spirit (*yangshen* 陽神), attained at the end of the practice and equivalent to the Original Spirit (*yuanshen*).

This “embodied spirit” or “spiritual body” is often depicted in Neidan works as a newborn or young child, but a detail in the illustration reproduced on this page deserves attention: the newly egressed Yang Spirit has the same semblances as the practitioner. The embryo, or dharma-body, or Yang Spirit, is an immortal replica of oneself, freed from the obstructions and constraints of one’s ordinary destiny (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 - The Yang Spirit. *Xingming guizhi* 性命圭旨 (Principles of the Conjoined Cultivation of Nature and Existence).

Conclusion

As we have seen, immortality in Taoism does not depend on destiny, but requires—and even consists in—changing destiny. As a series of events and circumstances related to one another, destiny lies to a large extent in

³⁸ *Xiuzhen houbian*, 14a-b; trans. in Pregadio 2019: 62.

one's own hands and is substantially open to change. That, however, only concerns one aspect of the Taoist view. From a different viewpoint, destiny in the ordinary sense is deemed to be secondary or even irrelevant compared to one's "true destiny." A human being is seen as a mere temporary embodiment, subject to birth and death, of the Breath of the Dao, which knows no birth and no death. As a consequence, in Taoism, what attains immortality is not the physical body but an inner person generated by the practitioner. Different practices enable a Taoist to recover or newly generate that immortal person: we have seen this in the "release from the corpse," in "untying the knots," and in the conception and delivery of the alchemical embryo, called "a body outside the body."

Returning to Bai Yuchan, he says in another work attributed to him: "When the embryo is delivered and one 'changes the bones', when 'outside the body there is another body', that is the Yang Spirit."³⁹ Remembering what we saw earlier about bones as a feature that reveals one's destiny, the meaning of these words is clear: by generating and delivering the alchemical embryo, one changes one's destiny. With his words, Bai Yuchan is following the teaching of his master, who answered his question, "Is my destiny to become immortal in this life?" by saying: "Anyone can do it."

³⁹ *Haiqiong Bai zhenren yulu* 海瓊白真人語錄 (Recorded Sayings of the Realized Man Bai [Yuchan] of Haiqiong; DZ 1307), 1.13a (脫胎換骨，身外有身... 此陽神也).

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