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Making Transcendents

Ascetics and Social Memory
in Early Medieval China

Robert Ford Campany



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Hagiographic Persuasions

If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. . . . If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, pick up, take on, engage with, react to, quote, differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to, assimilate, align oneself with, copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody, extract from, distort, attend to, resist, simplify, reconstitute, elaborate on, develop, face up to, master, subvert, perpetuate, reduce, promote, respond to, transform, tackle.

—Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*

EVERY INSTANCE of discourse about a holy person, whether oral or written, is, among other things, an attempt at persuasion. This feature is not unique to hagiographic writings, nor is it their only feature worth examining. But it is important to ask: in hagiographies, who was attempting persuade whom of what, and how? What interests and outcomes were at stake in these persuasive efforts? How do extant texts use rhetorical strategies and reflect social contexts of attempted persuasion? We saw some partial answers in Chapter 5, regarding the stories adepts were said to have reported about themselves. Here I shift the focus to other agents to discuss hagiographic persuasion in both senses of “persuasion”: how texts attempted to persuade readers (and what they tried to persuade them of) and the ideological persuasions (or sets of interests) from which they did so.

It may be true, as some have said, that collective memory tends to be conservative in nature.¹ But it is not a static, monolithic, or uncontested thing. In fact it

Epigraph: Patterns of Intention, 59.

1. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 14.

is not a thing at all: rather, “collective memory” is a convenient label for the always ongoing social processes (and the products of those processes) by which people appropriate, shape, and transmit elements of the past. One of the many things narratives about *xian* (or any sort of holy person in any society) attest to is how people with varying interests shaped and reshaped memories of these figures.² Just as the reputation of a practitioner of *xian* arts during his or her lifetime was continually being forged, managed, received, and contested by many interested parties, including the practitioner, so, too, these evaluative and persuasive processes continued after the practitioner’s departure, carried on by the same parties except for the practitioner.³ And, as the Michael Baxandall epigraph suggests, it is more empirically accurate—more closely descriptive of what in fact happens in human cultures over time—to think of ourselves as studying what various shapers of narrative did with available material than to imagine ourselves as documenting what “influence” an earlier “version” had on a later one. We will see how proponents of the quest for *xian*-hood reprised and recast earlier figures, in an attempt to persuade others of, and by means of, these recastings. In some cases the evidence points to deliberate, creative misprision, even violent misreadings on the part of the crafters of collective memory.⁴ I have argued above that early medieval hagiographies were not fictions in the modern sense of being made up from whole cloth. Here, however, I argue that neither were they neutral receptacles into which past stories were poured. They were something more complex: they were *reworkings* of earlier material and thus of reputations. In many cases this reworking escapes our notice because we have no other stories, or no significantly different stories, of a particular adept for comparison. But sometimes we do have sharply rival stories to compare, and here we catch glimpses of the hagiographic reshaping process at work.

2. Long-range diachronic studies of such hagiographic reshapings include Bujard, “Le culte de Wangzi Qiao ou la longue carrière d’un immortel,” a superb work of scholarship; and Kirkland, “The Making of an Immortal.”

3. Except (from the point of view of the *imaginaire*) in cases where *xian* were claimed to return periodically to their old homes or to the temples dedicated to them. Of course, we may also choose to see such reports as themselves simply another strategy by which others sought to shape the reputations of departed virtuoso practitioners.

4. I draw the phrase “violent misreadings” from the title of a recent article by Michael Puett that provides a striking example of what it describes: a group of authors present a surprising, even disconcerting interpretation of a passage in an earlier text; this is not due to their somehow having misunderstood the earlier passage and thus “gotten it wrong” despite their efforts, but is instead a rhetorical strategy deliberately deployed to advance their own argumentative and persuasive goals by reshaping the passage in a direction that suits them. As Puett puts it, “The authors were aware of the discrepancy and were actively playing on that discrepancy in order to develop their claims” (“Violent Misreadings,” 36).

As elsewhere, the question of authorship arises: exactly who was responsible for this textual portrayal of an adept? It may be that the compilers of the extant hagiographies and the authors of the relevant histories are themselves directly responsible for many of the rewritings these works contain. But I suspect that in many cases these reshaping had been done already by hands unseen to us, and the compilers were more or less quoting materials now lost. In almost all of the cases I will discuss,⁵ and in virtually all others as well, we simply cannot know the ultimate sources of the traditions that the author-compilers report. But by comparing different stories of the same figure we can see processes of contestation now otherwise hidden, the sorts of processes that generated all the texts we have and in which these texts themselves participated.

Persuasive Effects

Certain features of hagiographic narratives seem especially designed, whatever their other functions, to persuade readers or hearers of their veracity. We had occasion to note this reality effect⁶ in Chapter 5, for example, when we saw Ge Hong suggesting that it was the level of graphic detail in some accounts of celestial palaces or distant mountains that convinced audiences of their truthfulness. The more precise the descriptive detail, the more real the narrative seemed. Of the many other features of hagiographies that could be pointed out as functioning similarly, I will note only one: some stories build in characters who doubt the truth of an adept's claims or the efficacy of his arts. Events then unfold in a way that convinces the skeptic inside the story, and hence, the story argues, any doubters in the audience should be similarly convinced.

One particularly dramatic example of this rhetorical strategy occurs in the hagiography of Liu Gen preserved in *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*. It allows us to glimpse the sort of struggle for status that must have been waged on the ground between local officials and adepts, as well as the awesome powers adepts were often believed to wield and the vivid, hair-raising spectacles they could mount for audiences. It reminds us that transcendents could be objects of fear and dread, and it shows us ways in which they created such impressions. But, in addition, it also constitutes a textual attempt to persuade readers of something.

5. With the possible exception of stele inscriptions, whose sponsors are named in the inscriptions. Even here we cannot assume that these named individuals were the ultimate originators of the stories they commissioned to be chiseled in stone, but we do know that they were happy enough with the textual portrayals to have paid to have them carved and erected.

6. A phrase I draw from somewhere in Stephen Greenblatt's writings.

Commandant Zhang, the new governor, took Gen to be a fake, and he sent lictors to summon him, plotting to have him killed. The entire district remonstrated with Zhang on Gen's behalf, but Zhang would not drop the orders. The lictors reached Gen, intending to order him to return with them, but Gen would not comply. Then Zhang's envoy reached Gen and invited him to return. Gen replied, "What does Commandant Zhang want with me that he sent you all here? I fear that if I do not go back with you, you will all be accused of not daring to come here to summon me." And so Gen went to the Commandant's offices that day. At the time of his arrival, the offices were filled with visitors. The Commandant ordered over fifty men brandishing swords and pikes to tie Gen up and stand him at attention. Gen's face showed no change in color. The Commandant interrogated Gen as follows: "So, do you possess any *dao* arts?" "Yes." "Can you summon ghosts?" "I can." "Since you can," said the Commandant, "you will bring ghosts before this chamber bench at once. If you do not, I will have you tortured and killed." Gen replied, "Causing ghosts to appear is quite easy."

Gen borrowed a brush and an inkstone and composed a memorial. [In a moment,] a clanging sound like that of bronze or iron could be heard outside, and then came a long whistling sound, extremely plangent.⁷ All who heard it were awestruck, and the visitors all shook with fear. In another moment, an opening several dozen feet wide appeared in the south wall of the chamber, and four or five hundred armored troops could be seen passing orders down the lines. Several dozen crimson-clad swordsmen then appeared, escorting a carriage straight through the opened wall into the chamber. The opened wall then returned to its former state. Gen ordered the attendants to present the ghosts. With that, the crimson-clad guards flung back the shroud covering the carriage to reveal an old man and an old woman tightly bound inside. They hung their heads before the chamber bench. Upon examining them closely, the Commandant saw that they were his own deceased father and mother. Shocked and dismayed, he wept and was completely at a loss. The ghosts reprimanded him, saying, "When we were alive, you had not yet attained office, so we received no nourishment from your salary. Now that we are dead, what do you mean by offending a venerable official among divine transcendentals and getting us arrested? After causing such a difficulty as this, aren't you ashamed even to stand among other people?" The Commandant came down the steps and knocked his head on the ground before Gen, saying that he deserved to die and begging that

7. Skill in whistling was often associated with transcendentals (see Edwards, "Principles of Whistling"), and whistling, as here, was also a method for controlling spirits.

his ancestors be pardoned and released. Gen ordered the five hundred troops to take out the prisoners and release them. As the carriage moved out, the wall opened back up; then, when it was outside, the wall closed again and the carriage was nowhere to be seen. Gen had also disappeared.⁸

Not satisfied with recounting this vivid proof of Gen's powers, the story ends with an even more explicit caution against presuming to question adepts' abilities:

[After this,] the Commandant was rueful and vacant-minded and looked like someone who had gone mad. His wife died soon after, then revived and said, "I saw your ancestors. They were incensed and were demanding to know why you offended the venerable officials of the divine transcendents. They said they had seen to it that I was apprehended and that next they would come to kill you." A month later, the Commandant, his wife, and their son all died.⁹

The prospect of having one's own deceased family members seek one's death for having offended a transcendent must have struck fear in the hearts of many listeners and readers: here was yet another way to run afoul of potent, sometimes menacing ancestors. Such a fate might, this story implies, befall anyone who questioned or threatened a capable adept. All narratives in which an authority figure challenges or tests an adept, only to see the adept's powers vindicated, share this basic rhetorical structure.¹⁰

Contested Endings

In their book *Living Narrative*, Ochs and Capps document how stories and counter-stories often spring up together; even interlocutors who were present at the same event often oppose each other's narrative renderings. "In each conversational inter-

8. *TL*, 241–242.

9. The tale is recounted in Ge's *Traditions*; see *ibid.* For more on the religious, narrative, and psychological relations between ancestors and descendants, see Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*.

10. Several emperors are on record as having tested the arts of adepts. The most elaborately documented episode was Cao Cao's summoning to court of several known practitioners, probably between 216 C.E., the year Cao was ennobled as king of Wei, and 220, the year of his death. Zhang Hua's third-century *Treatise on Curiosities* records the names of sixteen adepts who were summoned. Their arts, prominently including abstention from "grains" and circulation of *qi*, are listed; Zuo Ci, whom we met in Chapter 7, is described as having emerged in good health from a room after a year of ingesting only water. Cao Cao's son Cao Zhi left eyewitness reports of some of these practitioners, some favorable, others debunking; see *Bowu zhi* 5, items 178–184, pp. 61–63; *SW*, 287–293; *TL*, 150–152, 279–286; Goodman, *Ts'ao P'i Transcendent*, 85; Holzman, "Ts'ao Chih and the Immortals." As we saw in Chapter 7, Cao Cao reportedly attempted to kill the adept Zuo Ci, who was shown making a mockery of Cao's and other rulers' attempts to control him.

action, a prevailing narrative meets resistance through a counter-narrative, which in turn may be adopted or resisted.”¹¹ It is hardly surprising, then, that surviving texts preserve conflicting viewpoints on the authenticity of particular adepts, their success, and the meaning of their apparent deaths or departures, each seeking to persuade readers of its veracity. What would be shocking would be if this were not so, if the texts spoke with unanimity on particular adepts. This aspect of the texts no doubt reflects a similar multiplicity of views in oral narrative and in the ongoing extratextual discourse on particular figures.

Perhaps the earliest recorded disagreement about a particular adept’s success is found in the *Shi ji* narrative of Li Shaojun. Sima Qian, writing a few decades after the events in question, states flatly that Li died, but he also reports that the emperor maintained Li had simply transformed and departed, a claim echoed in later hagiographies.¹² To this case we might compare a subnarrative in the hagiography of Wang Yuan that tells of Wang’s lay host, one Chen Dan, who served Wang for over thirty years. Having assisted at Wang’s departure into transcendence, Chen himself died a hundred days later. “Some said that Chen Dan had obtained Wang Yuan’s *dao* and so [merely] transformed and departed; but others said that Yuan knew Dan was destined to die soon, so he abandoned him and departed.”¹³ Two facts characterize both Li’s and Chen’s cases: rival interpretations of a practitioner’s apparent demise begin immediately, and surviving texts mention both opposing sides.

There are many other textual examples of such rival views; most of them, however, do not portray the disagreement but instead participate in it. The survival of contesting story lines in extant texts must reflect to some extent a wider clash of views that took place outside those texts. This topic is worthy of sustained consideration elsewhere, but here it suffices to mention a few examples. Luan Ba, a learned official known for his efforts to promote education and standardize ritual, is recorded in both Fan Ye’s (398–446 C.E.) *History of the Later Han (Hou Han shu)* and in Ge Hong’s *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* as having abolished the temples of rapacious local deities. Fan’s *History*, however, records Luan as having killed himself while under guard¹⁴ while Ge’s *Traditions* maintains that Luan ascended into the heavens as a transcendent, a reputation developed in subsequent scriptures, in the Shangqing revelations collected by Tao Hongjing in *Declarations of the Perfected (Zhen’gao)*, and in temple inscriptions.¹⁵ The female adept known simply as “Cheng

11. Ochs and Capps, *Living Narrative*, 16.

12. See *Shi ji* 28:1385–1386; and *TL*, 222–228.

13. *TL*, 259–260.

14. He had opposed an imperial tomb project because it would displace many commoners’ graves, and he had protested the murder of two officials, which angered the sitting emperor.

15. *Hou Han shu* 57:1841–1842; see further *TL*, 252–255 and 452–453.

Wei's wife" died, according to Huan Tan's 桓譚 *New Discourses* (*Xin lun* 新論), but Ge's *Traditions*, while telling her story in a similar way, states she performed *shijie* and departed into transcendence.¹⁶

These contested endings dovetail with instances of *shijie*, "escape by means of a corpse substitute," and *bingjie*, "escape by weapon." In a culture where such methods were the stuff of common lore (if not in their details, then certainly in their basic formats), the death of a known practitioner of esoteric arts must have assumed an indeterminacy; it might always have been an apparent death, an instance of *shijie*. No wonder, then, that we find it said by the adept Wang Yuan's lay supporter, Chen Dan, on the occasion of Wang's death: "Chen knew Wang had departed as a transcendent and so did not dare bury his body in the ground."¹⁷ Similarly, when the adept Gu Qiang, whose elaborate recountings we saw in Chapter 5, died of illness at the home of one Huang Zheng, Huang "suspected he had transformed and departed. A little over a year later he tried boring into the coffin to have a look. The corpse was intact there."¹⁸ Clearly Huang had heard stories of adepts performing *shijie*; one imagines him debating whether to risk¹⁹ opening Gu's coffin, finally giving in to temptation, hoping to find it corpse-free.

Persuasions in Stone

Persons deemed to have become *xian* were sometimes eulogized in inscriptions on stone stelae placed in homes, before shrines, and (at least in one known case) in tombs.²⁰ I here discuss two examples of such stele-inscribed hagiographies,²¹ one dating to 169 C.E., and the other almost certainly Eastern Han as well. Both have been rather frequently studied, but I examine them as attempts to persuade audiences.

First, however, let us consider some general rhetorical aspects of stele inscriptions in this period.²² It was essential to how they conveyed meanings that they

16. See *TL*, 139–141.

17. *Ibid.*, 260.

18. *NP* 20:348. I have no information on Huang Zheng.

19. Contact with death and the dead was normally considered ritually polluting, so opening a coffin was not something that would have been undertaken lightly.

20. It is possible that some were also placed *in front of* tombs that were claimed to be empty. The one known case of entombment of such a stele is discussed below.

21. A third, not discussed here but mentioned in Chapter 6, was dedicated to Wangzi Qiao; see Holzman, *Immortals, Festivals, and Poetry in Medieval China*; and Raz, "Creation of Tradition," 96–108.

22. Helpful overviews include Ebrey, "Later Han Stone Inscriptions"; Zhao, "Stone Inscriptions of the Wei-Jin Nanbeichao Period"; Ch'en, "Inscribed Stelae during the Wei, Chin, and Nan-ch'ao"; and Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 1–41. I learned of Miranda Brown, *The Politics of Mourning in Early China*, only after I had completed work on the manuscript for this book.

were erected at particular places. Whatever else they did, they claimed that the figures and events they recounted should be seen as connected to the place where they stood. This connection was not inevitable or given, if only for the reason that it risked being forgotten by successive generations; the words on the stone served to keep the connection green, transforming an otherwise generic place into the site of a specific memory. As a consequence, these stone inscriptions, like transmitted texts, were quintessentially works of collective, public memory, functioning within a memorial culture to preserve—and persuasively shape in particular directions—the memory of significant past persons and events. This was necessary—the point is obvious, but worth remembering—because the persons and events were otherwise no longer present or accessible. The inscription gave a local habitation and a name to phenomena otherwise at risk of being reduced to airy nothings. In addition, the inscribed words were often recited aloud by visitors. Remembrance was vocalized and performed on the spot, the words on the stone serving as prompts.²³ The stones did not just refer to past events: they made a bid to orchestrate the lived, vocalized performance of memory of those events on the site and to evoke other sympathetic responses from visitors.²⁴

Every narrative, like every religious virtuoso known to history, has its *sponsors*: people with an interest in putting the story before others, making its messages known, supporting the points made by the story, spurring others to remember and themselves talk about a spiritual achiever or significant past events. One of the most important aspects of stelae is that, unlike most transmitted narratives, they often record the names (and sometimes the titles and residences) of the individuals who sponsored their making. Someone had to pay for the stone and the skilled carving (as well, in some cases, as the elegant words of the eulogy carved there); paying for these things was a sign of proper respect, which was in turn a sign of virtue and hence a reputation-enhancer in its own right; and so sponsors wanted it known that they had contributed to the memory site upon which the public gazed. Like the mention of the names of particular aristocratic patrons of transcendence-seekers in transmitted hagiographies, these carved listings of donors' names are one of the few direct testimonies we have concerning who was directly and concretely involved in sponsoring the memories and reputations of individuals.

So much for sponsors; what about the audience? The primary audience of stela inscriptions was anyone, local resident or pilgrim from afar, who stood at the spot, looked upon the stone, and perhaps recited its words. But the audience potentially

23. For this and the previous point I draw in particular on Brashier, "Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Stelae."

24. We have records from the period of literati standing before stelae and weeping; for an example, see Tian, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture*, 54.

extended far beyond the immediate site. Inscriptions were *locally installed* but publicly available declarations that could be copied, recorded, or otherwise remembered and reproduced (perhaps with alterations) *translocally* by far-flung parties with widely varying interests. These could range from admirers of virtuosi to collectors of the lore of a locality to collectors of antiquities or connoisseurs of epigraphy.²⁵ Most of what we know about early medieval inscriptions comes from such translocal collectors and their transmitted texts; relatively few actual stones survive, but large numbers of records of inscriptions have come down to us.²⁶ Li Daoyuan's 酈道元 (d. 527) important topography, *Annotated Classic on Waterways* (*Shuijing zhu* 水經注), preserves explicit quotations of dozens of stelae observed at specific locations, but many other early medieval texts drew silently on inscriptions for source material. This has been particularly well documented for early medieval Buddhist hagiographies;²⁷ it was true for many other texts, particularly narrative compilations, as well. Our documentation of the *reception* of stele inscriptions, although destined to remain woefully incomplete, consists largely of the various transmitted translocal texts that explicitly recorded or silently quoted or paraphrased them. This reception, of course, was a function of the interests not of the inscriptions' sponsors but of their readers. In a very rough way we might say that the more often and widely a particular inscription was taken up, quoted, and used or responded to in various translocal texts, the more successful it was in propagating its message to audiences. An inscription only recently unearthed, whose specific content of persons and events is totally unknown in the received record, is one that, absent further evidence, we must conclude did not succeed as well in spreading awareness of its topic beyond its immediate local environment.²⁸

What were the persuasive aims and interests of inscriptions? These vary by case, but in general we can say that one aim of erecting a stele at a particular place was to enhance the prestige of that place while promoting its sponsors' reputations. A stele memorializing a person sought to associate that person with the place in question. It also associated the memory of its departed subject with the memory of those sponsoring the inscription: the sponsors became part of the story and inserted themselves by name into what was remembered at the site. Naturally the

25. For a study of writings about particular localities in this period, see Chittick, "The Development of Local Writing in Early Medieval China."

26. Ebrey, "Later Han Stone Inscriptions," 326–327, makes the point with particular clarity. By the Song, the making of *rubbings* of old stelae had come into vogue, but at this writing I am uncertain how far back this practice has been documented.

27. See Shinohara, "Two Sources of Chinese Buddhist Hagiographies."

28. Of course, this argument from silence only goes so far, since a great many transmitted texts have been lost over the centuries.

view advanced in the inscription of the persons or events in question depended quite directly on the viewpoints and interests of the stele's sponsors. But counter-narratives, oral or written, could always be sponsored by others.

Let us now turn to two stele inscriptions concerning individuals claimed to be transcendents. The first was found in a tomb near Luoyang in 1991 and has drawn considerable scholarly attention. It is a relatively small stele (98 cm, or slightly over three feet tall) and was erected in 169 C.E. Near its rounded crown, the place of honor, are carved the names of the two Eastern Han emperors with whom the subject of the stele was claimed to have interacted.²⁹ I intersperse the following translation with running comments.³⁰

Stele of Lord Fei 肥君 of Anle in eastern Liang district, Henan. Officer in Waiting in the Lateral Quarters [of the palace] under the Han, the Lord's personal name was Zhi 致, his style Changhua 萇華. He was a native of Liang district. As a youth he embodied the freedom of naturalness; as an adult he displayed conduct that distinguished him from the profane.³¹ He often dwelled in seclusion, nurturing his resolve. The Lord habitually dwelt atop a jujube tree, not descending for three years. [Thus] he roamed free and easy with the Dao and by his conduct established his reputation. Word of him spread everywhere within the seas. Crowds of gentlemen came to look up at him, gathering like clouds.

From the opening lines we learn that Fei Zhi at some point held (or at least was here claimed to have held) a sinecurial palace appointment. We also see a pattern familiar from earlier chapters: an adept goes into seclusion (in this case vertically, by dwelling atop a tree³²) but, precisely because of that gesture, he draws large crowds who clamor for access to him. Word spreads as people talk about this strange, impressive figure.

29. These are Emperors Zhang (r. 75–88 C.E.) and He (r. 88–106 C.E.).

30. I have translated following the photo reproductions and transcriptions of the text in Little and Eichman, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, 150–151; Schipper, “Une stèle taoïste des Han orientaux récemment découverte,” 246–247; and Wang, “Dong Han daojiao diyi keshi Fei Zhi bei yanjiu,” 15–16. I have greatly benefited from consulting the translations in Schipper, “Une stèle taoïste des Han orientaux récemment découverte,” 240–242; and Raz, “Creation of Tradition,” 54–57.

31. My thanks to Terry Kleeman for his assistance with my understanding of this and other passages in the inscription.

32. Jujubes are commonly mentioned as a preferred item in transcendents' cuisine. Dwelling atop trees or columns is a feat attributed to ascetics in many cultures and times; the adept Chaofu is claimed in the *Liexian zhuan* to have done so.

Now at this time a red *qi* accumulated and filled the skies. From the ministers and directors down to the hundred officials there were none who could dispel it. When the ruler heard that in Liang there was a man of the Dao atop a jujube tree, he sent an envoy to invite the Lord with due ceremony. The Lord, out of loyalty, hastened in³³ to protect the ruler and produced a timely calculation that dispelled the calamitous anomaly. He was honored with the post of Officer in Waiting of the Lateral Quarters and an emolument of a million in coin, but the Lord declined [the position] and did not accept [the cash].

The imperial invitation is delivered respectfully; this, then, will begin as a story of an adept's loyalty to an emperor (the term mentioned is *zhong* 忠, a vassal's faithful obedience to his lord) rather than a lesson in the adept's autonomy. But, after the adept dispels the miasma³⁴ by means of some divinatory technique, he refuses the imperial rewards of cash and office, thus reaffirming his autonomy after all: he will not be drawn into the usual network of reciprocal obligation. On the other hand, the inscription opens by claiming that he did at some point serve in the palace. The relative chronology of it all is quite vague, perhaps deliberately so.

In the middle of the eleventh month, the ruler longed for fresh mallow. The Lord thereupon entered his chamber and after a little while emerged holding two bundles of mallow. The ruler asked the Lord, "Where did you get these?" The response was, "I procured them from the governor of Shu commandery." A courier was sent to make inquiries at the commandery, and the commandery reported back, "At dawn on the fifteenth of the eleventh month, a red-carriaged envoy arrived and plucked two sprigs of fresh mallow." Thus was confirmed the Lord's spiritual power.³⁵ He penetrated the mysterious and wondrous, now emerging from the abyss, now entering the dark realms, his transformations hard to recognize! He traveled several myriad *li* in less than the space of a single day; he wandered out to the eight extremities, resting in transcendents' courts.

Fei's long-distance mastery exactly resembles that attributed to many adepts (including Jie Xiang and Zuo Ci) in transmitted hagiographies. These lines estab-

33. The expression *xiangran lai* 翔然來 here could be understood literally—"he flew in"—since the capacity for flight was often attributed to transcendents.

34. Schipper ("Une stèle taoïste des Han récemment découverte," 242) suggests it is not baleful *qi* but an auspicious celestial anomaly signaling Fei's own active presence in the world, but the officials' attempts to "dissolve" it and its characterization as a "calamitous anomaly" (*zaibian* 災變) make this seem very unlikely.

35. His *shenming* 神明, a term of multiple connotations, sometimes literally signifies the brightness of a practitioner's indwelling spirits, but sometimes not, and is very difficult to render into intelligible English.

lish Fei's ability to roam laterally throughout the cosmos, a quintessential attribute of transcendents. He procures the mallow from within his "chamber," making clear that the mechanism of retrieval was a meditative journey of the spirit (whether he himself made the spirit-journey or sent an envoy). This feat also, we are told, "confirmed" (*yan* 驗) Fei's spiritual powers—a loaded word implying initial doubt of his ability successfully reversed by an incontrovertible demonstration, a convincing and tangible reality effect carried out before an audience. Just as the feat convinced the audience described in the text, the story-makers hope that the feat will now convince skeptical readers of the stele.

The Lord took Zhang Wu 張吳 of Wei commandery, Yanzi 晏子 of Qi, and Huang Yuan 黃淵 of Haishang as his teachers, and was befriended by Master Redpine 赤松子. While still living he was hailed as a perfected person, and in his age he had no peer.

Here is established a lineage for Fei—whether actual or fictitious we will never know. Of the four figures mentioned, only Redpine, here marked as a friend rather than a teacher proper, is clearly known from other sources.³⁶ The insertion of a figure as widely heralded as Redpine is a bid to impress viewers of the stele: if they knew anything at all about *xian*, Redpine was a *xian* they would have heard of. Here as elsewhere in the text we see the sort of grandiosity expected in such a document.³⁷ Taking it at face value, we would assume its subject was widely known throughout the empire and ubiquitously mentioned in transmitted texts of many kinds.

The meritorious officer and Grandee of the Ninth Order, Xu You 許幼, a native of Dongxiang in Luoyang, served Lord Fei with the rites due a transcendent master (*xianshi* 仙師) and with warmest reverence invited him to reside in his home. By following the Lord, You became able to surpass the world³⁸ and so departed.

Here is a clear instance of the pattern of lay patronage discussed in Chapter 6. In this case the lay patron becomes a disciple and apparently transcends—or at least

36. Scholars have surmised that two of the other names mentioned, Yanzi and Huang Yuan, are perhaps variants of figures known from received literature, but these identifications must remain speculative.

37. Writers of stele texts were quite aware that they were exaggerating their subjects' virtues and expressed shame at doing so; see Brashier, "Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Stelae," 255–256.

38. *Dushi* 度世, perhaps meaning to surpass one's own generation in age, implies at least longevity if not outright transcendence; here, at least, its meaning is a bit vague, perhaps deliberately so.

attains great longevity—in his own right. The patron is remembered alongside the adept by being named in the adept's story. A place is thus reserved for him in the body of collective memory surrounding Fei.

I, [Xu] You's son Jian 建, styled Xiaochang 孝菴,³⁹ out of a compassionate heart and filial nature, long constantly for [these] numinous beings.⁴⁰ In the second year of the Establishing Peace era [*jianning* 建寧 2, that is, 169 C.E.], when Jupiter was in the *jiyou* position, on day *bingwu*, the fifteenth of the fifth month,⁴¹ I, Xiaochang, erected for the Lord a provisional altar.⁴² Morning and evening, my entire family, diligently and without daring to let up, reverently approach Lord Fei with offerings appropriate to the season.⁴³ The divine transcendent [then] retreats into silence, solemn as a submerged dragon.⁴⁴ Though we wish to pay obeisance to him and see him, there is no route by which to reach him. I respectfully erect this stone to make known our profound veneration and to set forth what is recounted above to instruct and exhort the young.⁴⁵ The lyrics⁴⁶ say:

39. Literally “filial to Chang”; in so naming his son, Xu You expressed his devotion to Lord Fei.

40. That is, on Lord Fei and Xu You, both of whom are now claimed to be transcendents. The line may also, less probably in my opinion, be understood as meaning “long constantly for spirits” in general.

41. The date designation is actually a bit more complicated than I have indicated and invokes the *jianchu* (“establishing/removing”) hemerological system; see Raz, “Creation of Tradition,” 56 n.44; and for a summary explanation of the system, see Kalinowski, ed., *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale*, 103–104.

42. *Bianzuo* 便坐. *Zuo* commonly designates an altar space, metaphorically configured as a place or seat at a banquet table, where the gods temporarily come to rest to partake of their offerings. The sense of *bian* here is that the stele is a provisional or (better) supplemental “seat” as contrasted to a more permanent shrine altar located elsewhere. See Schipper, “Une stele taoïste des Han récemment découverte,” 241 n.7.

43. This reference to the four seasons may mean not that the foods offered are seasonal but that the family makes offerings continually.

44. This passage may mean one of two things: either it describes strange sensory phenomena repeatedly observed (by family members or by an attending spirit medium) at the moment the offerings are completed, suggesting the numinosity of the recipient (thus Schipper, “Une stele taoïste des Han récemment découverte,” 241 n.9), or it describes Fei's now-retired state, no longer actively present in the world (thus Raz, “Creation of Tradition,” 56). I lean toward the former interpretation. Either way, the ensuing sentence makes clear that some sort of withdrawal into inaccessibility is implied.

45. Perhaps the children of Xu Xiaochang's own family.

46. The *ci* 辭 or “lyrics” portion of a stele inscription (also known as the “hymn” [*song* 頌]) was a section in tetrasyllabic verse, often (as here) set off verbally from the prose text with

What splendor! What felicity!
 The divine lord of former times: how brilliant!
 Of vast renown,
 He has ascended and from afar gazes upon the cosmic filaments.⁴⁷
 We sons and grandsons can merely stand here below
 Looking up respectfully to you who are without hindrances.
 We therefore have carved this stone
 To communicate the true situation.⁴⁸
 We express the wish that you might at all times
 Grant us your blessings and auspicious fortune.

Almost all stelae say something about the circumstances and sponsorship of their own making, just as many Chinese scriptures tell the stories of their own origins. This one is no exception. The sponsoring donor and implied author (or at least approver of the contents) of the inscription is named, and we learn that he, Xu Jian, is the son of Fei's patron and follower, Xu You. The whole family is hitching itself in this public pronouncement to Fei's reputation, a reputation the stone seeks to promulgate and enhance. The son as sponsor is also proclaiming his own devotion and filiality; he pronounces himself compassionate and filial, diligent and reverent, generous and pious, and has performatively demonstrated these commendable qualities by his erection of the stele we now read. The text speaks of regular familial offerings to Lord Fei (no one outside the Xu family is mentioned as participating in these), offerings that are claimed to evoke a response from their intended recipient, even if he remains obscure and largely inaccessible. The last lines of the verse lyrics make explicit the devoted family's request for blessings in return for their continued devotion to the absent-yet-present transcendent. The stele base holds three basins clearly intended to hold offering foods or lamp oil. The stele, in a neatly compact

some such phrase as "the lyrics say." According to some modern scholars, this verse portion was "the inscription's focal point, not . . . its appendage" (Brashier, "Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Stelae," 263), and it was the verses in particular that were often memorized and recited by visitors to the stele site.

47. He looks upon the "strands" or "filaments" (*ji* 紀) of the sky, shorthand here for certain particular constellations understood as binding the universe together; see Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, 241–242.

48. The line's meaning is rather unclear, and the situation is not helped by the fact that a graph is missing. The sense may be that the inscribers hope thereby to reach (*da* 達) the Lord's "feelings and understanding" (*qing li* 情理) so as to provoke the response described in the next line. But at this point in many inscription verses we find a statement to the effect that the stele has been erected to set forth the subject's story so that others may know of his virtue. So the line may simply be a flowery way of saying that.

fashion, serves as both inscription text and altar.⁴⁹ It is self-designated as a “provisional altar,” perhaps implying that it was the conveniently accessible counterpart of a main shrine altar located elsewhere. The stone serves, as Schipper remarks, not simply as an object of memory but also as the locus of the ongoing spiritual presence (if only a periodic presence evoked by offerings) of the transcendent; it is his altar and the seat of his spirit⁵⁰—although I would add that a stele also presumes its subject’s absence: no stele would be necessary if Fei Zhi were still active in the household as he had once been. It seems likely that this altar-inscription was first erected inside the domestic compound of the Xu family and was then moved into Xu Jian’s tomb upon his death, perhaps so that he could continue his devotions in the other world⁵¹ or, more likely, as a kind of accountability report addressed by Xu Jian to his father and other ancestors in the unseen world.⁵²

The Regional Transcendent, Great Master of Five,⁵³ saw the barrens of the Queen Mother of the West and received [from her] a *dao* of transcendence. The disciples following the Great Master of Five were five: Tian Yu 田樞, Quan [lacuna] Zhong 全 . . . 中, Songzhi Jigong 宋直忌公, Bi Xianfeng 畢先風, and Master Xu 許先生.⁵⁴ All consumed stony fat and departed as transcendents.

The inscription closes by returning to matters of lineage. If, as seems most likely, the mysteriously titled Great Master of Five is to be understood as Fei Zhi, then we are being informed that his techniques of transcendence were directly revealed

49. Brashier (“Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Stelae,” 269–274) argues that such was the case generally with stelae in the Eastern Han; they commonly included a hole in the front surface a certain distance down from the top—sometimes obliterating inscriptional text material—from which food offerings were suspended for the subject to whom the stele was dedicated. Stelae were not just inert texts but also integral focal points in ritual programs.

50. Schipper, “Une stele taoïste des Han récemment découverte,” 239.

51. As suggested by Raz, “Creation of Tradition,” 77.

52. On this function of commemorative inscriptions placed in tombs, see Schottenhammer, “Einige Überlegungen zur Entstehung von Grabinschriften.” I thank Lothar von Falkenhausen for this reference.

53. The wording now becomes quite ambiguous, and scholars have offered numerous hypotheses as to the identity of this 土仙者大伍公. The only thing that seems fairly certain is that this compound title must refer either to Fei Zhi or to Xu You. I believe it is Lord Fei’s title in the bureaucratic hierarchy of *xian*, only now mentioned since it was bestowed on him after his ascension and would not have been used during his own lifetime (highlights of which were recounted in the body of the inscription above).

54. If we understand the Great Master of Five to be Fei Zhi, then this Master Xu must be Xu You; if the Great Master is understood as Xu You, then this Master Xu is probably Xu Jian himself. The former possibility seems to me more likely.

to him by the Queen Mother of the West in her divine precincts; whatever human teachers he may have had, he here is claimed to have enjoyed divine revelation as well. His lineage is then sketched downward in generational time from himself to five disciples, four of them otherwise unknown and one of whom is a member of the Xu family—almost certainly Xu You. All five are claimed to have become *xian* by ingesting “stony fat,” the name for a class of mineral compounds mentioned in transmitted hagiographies and texts on methods.⁵⁵ We read nothing else of their exploits. Given the presence in the tomb of the skeletal remains of more than one individual, it has been speculated that the five disciples named here are the persons entombed with the inscription. But this is unknowable.

Other than the explicit internal mention by name of its sponsor, everything about the text resembles transmitted hagiographies: the organization of the narrative of the adept’s exploits; the nature of those exploits (ascetic isolation, appearance at court, long-distance mastery, performance of divination on behalf of clients, refusal of ordinary economic relations); the depicted response of other people (crowds gathering, people talking, rulers sending invitations from afar, lay patronage); the construction of lineages and ascription of a following of disciples to the master. There is nothing idiosyncratic about the contents of the Fei Zhi inscription. Its 169 C.E. makers were clearly well informed of the sorts of stories told of successful adepts and the sorts of feats they were expected to perform. The only unusual—and, to us, extremely valuable—feature of the inscription is that it bears direct testimony to the linkage between an adept, his story, and the *local sponsors* of both adept and story, in this case a particular family named Xu that stood to gain status the more widely its sponsored transcendent and ancestor were recognized as *xian*. We can clearly see that in this instance it was this family that established a cult for a departed transcendent, a cult it sustained through regular offerings and through this stone proclamation, and that the transcendent in question was one to whom they claimed strong personal connections, a recent ancestor having sponsored the adept’s practice and eventually followed in his footsteps to transcend in his own right.

As far as is presently known, however, the cult of Fei Zhi never spread beyond the Xu family, despite the stele’s claims of Fei’s widespread renown. Of the many individuals mentioned in the inscription, the only ones clearly known in received literature are two Eastern Han emperors and the ancient, legendary adept Redpine. What this perhaps suggests is a failed attempt at hagiographic persuasion. The story

55. For examples, see Raz, “Creation of Tradition,” 74–77. Two good examples of its more luxuriant narrative possibilities may be seen in the *Traditions* hagiography of Wang Lie (*TL*, 338–341) and in several stories in which a protagonist happens upon a subterranean world in which he survives by ingesting mud-like mineral exudations, for example, *Youming lu* 63, cited in *Fayuan zhulin* 31:520c; *TPYL* 803.8a; and *LX* 213–214.

of Fei and Xu, admirably adapted though it was to contemporary narrative conventions and expectations surrounding the role of transcendent, seems never to have been taken up in any translocal compilation to reach wider audiences. It is possible, of course, that several or even many transmitted texts once discussed Fei and Xu, and that they have simply failed to survive down to modern times. What appears more likely is that Fei's story was never widely disseminated. After Fei's departure his story appears never to have won a wider circle of sponsors than the Xu family itself. Perhaps if his stele had been left above ground at a roadside shrine, rather than (apparently) being interred with its sponsor, it would have helped win more recognition for its subjects, a wider reputation that would have led to mentions in conversations, letters, perhaps regional histories and travel narratives, and eventual inclusion in one or more hagiographic compilations. Or perhaps the Xu family never wished to have his story spread about, though this seems very unlikely. As things stand, only since 1992 has the world become reacquainted with Lord Fei, and that in ways his story's sponsors could never have anticipated.

The second inscription is dedicated to the transcendent Tang Gongfang 唐公房.⁵⁶ This inscription, unlike Lord Fei's, has been known for many centuries and copied and discussed by Chinese scholars in transmitted texts at least since the Song (the famous Ouyang Xiu saw the stone in 1064 C.E.). It is certainly of Eastern Han date, but a more precise dating is unfortunately not yet possible.⁵⁷

The Lord's name was Gongfang, of Chenggu.⁵⁸ He was Thearch Yao's {descendant. Thearch Yao was sincere, reverent, able yet humble; the lord truly succeeded [10 graphs]} him. Hence he could raise up his household {achieve crossing-over, lift his home and as a transcendent [5 graphs]} depart. He soared up to the luminous brilliances, driving and riding yin and yang, flying into the limpid [heavens] and treading floating [clouds]. His allotted longevity was boundless. Although revered by kings and lords, treasured within the four seas, he would {not be moved even by a single [5 graphs]} hair. The nature of heaven and earth is what he most cherished.

56. Due to later avoidance of an imperial name, the *fang* of his given name is alternately written 昉. We will see other variations in his name across source texts; this is common.

57. My translation is based on the texts as reproduced in Wang Chang, comp., *Jinshi cuibian* 19:1b–2b and Chen Yuan, *Daojia jinshi lue*, 5–7. I have benefited from Raz, "Creation of Tradition," 78–96. Curly brackets { } enclose material that one or more modern scholars has suggested is missing in the lacunae. When the lacuna is longer than one graph, I supply the number of missing graphs in square brackets.

58. In the Hanzhong area. The adept in this case was thus a native of the same region in which he is now remembered and venerated.

The opening, like many biographical and hagiographical texts, establishes some of the subject's general characteristics. Among those highlighted in this case are Tang's ability to fly and ascend and his unusual longevity.

Ancient tradition says that in the second year of Wang Mang's regency [7–8 C.E.], when the Lord was serving as commandery officer, {he was once at leisure with colleagues [4 graphs]} eating melons in the garden when there was a Perfected Person⁵⁹ nearby. None of [Tang's] companions recognized him; only the Lord presented him with fine melons and then followed him and treated him with deference and decorum.

We see here the theme of recognition: only one with the inherent makings of a transcendent can correctly discern, through visual inspection, the hidden quality of a nearby figure. The disciple-to-be follows through with appropriate deference toward this mysterious master, rather than approaching him arrogantly, thus further demonstrating his worthiness to be taught. It is also of note that Tang is here said to have been serving as a commandery officer at the time, and that a specific year is supplied for his initial meeting with his teacher.

The Perfected Person was pleased, and consequently arranged a meeting with {the Lord} at the top of the mountain at the Xi valley entrance. There he presented the Lord with a divine medicine, saying, "After ingesting it you can travel at will⁶⁰ over thousands of miles and you will understand the speech of birds and beasts."

Two key components of any adept's reputation are the sort of method he follows to attain transcendence, and the abilities (other than long life) that accrue. In Tang's case, the vehicle of *xian*-hood is a "divine medicine" (*shenyao* 神藥)—some unspecified type of herbal or alchemical compound—and the two chief abilities conferred by this compound (and, no doubt, by its accompanying program of austerities) are flight (enabling rapid travel over long distances) and the ability to understand animals' calls. All of these are standard in the transcendent's repertoire.

At that time the prefectural capital was at Xicheng, over seven hundred *li* from [the Lord's] home. Traveling back and forth between official audiences, within

59. As in the Fei Zhi inscription above, this term, *zhenren* 真人, drawn from the *Zhuangzi* (where it has quite a different meaning), denotes an accomplished transcendent.

60. Literally "move your consciousness over myriad *li*" 移意萬里, but the sense, as seen immediately below, is that Tang becomes able to travel long distances very rapidly—an ability commonly attributed to transcendents and adepts.

the blink of an eye he would arrive. All the people in the commandery were surprised by this and reported it to the prefect, who granted him an official appointment.⁶¹

The wondrousness of Tang's long-distance mastery draws attention. Word travels to an official, who responds by granting the adept an appointment. These are again common tropes in received hagiographies.

[Once] a rat gnawed through the [prefect's] chariot roof. The Lord drew a jail on the ground, summoned the rat [into it] and killed it. Its belly was examined and found to contain the chariot roof. The prefect {set out} a banquet, wishing to follow the Lord and study the Dao. Gongfang did not immediately agree. The prefect angrily ordered his guards to arrest Gongfang's wife.

The plot grows more complex and suspenseful. Above it appeared that Tang and the prefect enjoyed a harmonious relationship, but now we see the trope—familiar from earlier chapters—of tension caused by an adept's refusal to transmit his esoteric methods to a pushy official. Here the official goes so far as to arrest Tang's wife, a move not only impudent but also risky. How will Tang respond?

Gongfang quickly returned to the valley entrance and called on his master to tell him of the imminent danger. His master returned with him in order to give Gongfang and his wife an elixir to drink, saying, "You may depart." The wife loved her household and could not bear to leave it. Then the master said, "Is it that you wish your entire household to depart with you?" The wife said, "That is my wish." So they daubed the elixir on the house posts and made the livestock and domestic animals drink it. In a moment a great wind and dark clouds appeared, gathering up Gongfang, his wife, their house and their domestic animals, all of them flying upwards and departing together.

In this case, then, the adept escapes the overweening official by means of swallowing an elixir that immediately wafts him upward. Here is narrated the crowning feat that Tang's local sponsors are proudest of.

In the past, Qiao 喬, Song 松, Cui 崔, and Bo 白 all attained the Dao alone, but Gongfang ascended and crossed over with his entire household. Great indeed! The tradition says, "Where a worthy dwells, munificence flows for a hundred

61. As pointed out by Raz ("Creation of Tradition," 81 n.108), various transcriptions of the text give varying graphs here, and the more common variant, *yuli* 御史, is problematic since *li* were functionaries appointed by local or regional magistrates, not by the court. In any case the overall sense is clear enough.

generations.” He has accordingly caused Xi village to be without mosquitoes in spring and summer, free of frost in the winter. Pestilence and poisonous vermin do not linger, noxious insects are repelled, and the hundred grains can be harvested. Nowhere under heaven is there such efficacious virtue and blessing. The multitudes of transcendents are on a par with the Dao; their virtue irrigates our native soil. Those who recognize his virtue are few, and through the generations none have recorded it.

The narrative’s sponsors boast of the fact that Tang did not ascend alone, nor did he merely take his wife or even, as had Liu An, his domestic animals. Tang took all these, and he also took his family’s *house* into the heavens—a secondary differentiation that sets him apart from the mass of *xian* and renders him superior to four particular former transcendents of note: Wangzi Qiao, Redpine, Cui Wenzhi 崔文子, and (probably) Master Whitestone 白石先生, three of whom are the subjects of received *Liexian zhuan* hagiographies and one, Whitestone, of a *Shenxian zhuan* entry.⁶² Each of these former *xian* is evoked only very elliptically with one character each, a testament to how easily the writer could presume his readers would recognize the figures intended. Here it is Tang himself to whom the glory of the achievement is directed, but another storyteller with a different agenda might use this detail as an occasion to tout the benefits of the particular “divine medicine” bestowed by Tang’s teacher.

Also stressed in this passage is Tang’s ongoing service to the community far beyond the moment of his ascension. He still exerts a palpable if unseen influence in the region, ensuring freedom from harmful insects and vermin and from damaging weather and thus assisting the local population in earning its livelihood.

Up to this point, the inscription, like the one devoted to Fei Zhi, entirely resembles received hagiographies in its narrative organization, its religious content, and its thematic emphases. Only when the text next turns self-referentially to the circumstances of its making and to its sponsors does it diverge generically from transmitted hagiography.

I, Guo Zhi 郭芝 of Nanyang, named Gongzai, Grand Administrator of Hanzhong,⁶³ have cultivated my government like the north star, managing it in the

62. The name “Bai/Bo” in the inscription may also refer to Wei Boyang (as assumed by Schipper, “Le culte de l’immortel Tang Gongfang,” 70), but the date of origin of that name is a matter of debate.

63. In modern Nanzheng district, Shaanxi Province. Hanzhong was connected with central Shu (modern Sichuan) by a famously winding north-south route through the mountains; together, the two areas were the original homeland of the Celestial Master community, and Tang’s cult in the region was surely connected to this community.

manner of Zhou and Shao. Joyous at the excellence of Lord Tang's spiritual efficacy, I realized that those eminent in the Dao are renowned, and those whose virtue is distinguished are revered in temples. In order to set forth auspicious instruction, I personally offered the monies, as a leader of the group of donors, to renovate and enlarge this temple [in order to] {gather} harmony and seek blessings and spread them among the people. We inscribed this stone with glowing verses to glorify the Lord's numinous fame. The lyrics say:

{To magnificent Lord Tang
Whose glory reaches that of Xuanhuang roaming free in the Lacquer Garden
Your *dao* matches that of Zhúang of Meng.}
Consequently enjoying the divine medicine,
You ascended floating to the clouds
Flitting about on wings. . . .⁶⁴

As we saw in the case of Fei, the sponsors of the stone text are named in the inscription so that they will be remembered alongside the transcendent regional patron they commemorate. As the stone "glorifies the Lord's numinous fame" (*yang jun lingyu* 揚君靈譽), it also lists the names of local worthies who, as a group, have appropriately recognized that fame and recorded its source for posterity. It announces its intention as "setting forth auspicious instruction" (*fa jiajiao* 發嘉教): the target audience, we are told, is not sufficiently aware of the Lord's virtue, and the stone seeks to remedy that.

Guo Zhi, as the "leader" (*changshuai* 倡率) of the "group of donors" (*qunyi* 群義) who contributed to the temple refurbishment and to the stele marking the occasion, enjoys pride of place on the front of the stele. But fifteen other principal donors are named on the stele's reverse side. All were officials hailing from the region where Tang had been active earlier. Nine bear the surname Zhu 祝 and were probably related by kinship. The fourth in the list, Zhu Gui 龜, is mentioned in the regional treatise *Huayangguo zhi* 華陽國志 as having been an Eastern Han appointee, and this fact, along with epigraphical analysis, is our best evidence for dating the stele to that period.⁶⁵ These are the men of means who have found it to be in their interest and that of their community to contribute funds toward the public recognition of transcendent Tang Gongfang's past achievement and his ongoing divine aid to the region. They have attached their reputations to his and have sought a place alongside him in the collective memory. They have furthermore made a

64. The inscription breaks off here.

65. See *Huayangguo zhi* 10C:807; and de Crespigny, *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms*, 1159–1160. After having been born in Hanzhong and then studied in the capital, Zhu Gui returned to his native region and was active there from the 190s on, after having been appointed by Liu Yan (on whom see de Crespigny, *ibid.*, 572–573).

bid to have their local *xian* acknowledged and taken up in translocal contexts by travelers, pilgrims, and text compilers.

In all of these aims they can be said to have succeeded. Unlike Fei Zhi, Tang Gongfang was rather widely mentioned in early medieval texts of several genres, attesting to the wider reputation he had won.⁶⁶ Each mention in these texts, however, was necessarily governed by its author's interests. "Tang Gongfang" comes to be a site at which various authors tell a story or relate a curious local phenomenon, their tellings framed by their respective agendas.

In the earliest of such mentions of which I am aware, Zhang Hua (d. 300 C.E.) in his *Treatise on Curiosities* (*Bowu zhi*) includes the following entry:

When Tang Fang ascended to become a transcendent, his chickens and dogs went with him. There was only a rat that he didn't take with him. Out of regret, the rat empties its guts three times a month. It's called Tang's Rat.⁶⁷

This passage occurs in the context of a still-burgeoning and once even more vast compendium of strange things from across the known world—places, peoples, customs, flora, fauna, land formations, names—a work so large and so forbiddingly full of oddities that Jin Emperor Wu reportedly asked Zhang to trim it down to a mere fraction of its original size and cut most of the disturbing anomalies.⁶⁸ What interested Zhang was not Tang's story per se but the unusual species of rat that his story was invoked to explain. But the rat's strange anatomy is inseparable from the story of Tang's ascension, since the rat's resentment at being left behind is the explanation for its anatomy.⁶⁹ Furthermore, if one's starting point was the rat, Tang's story could not be told without mentioning its most distinctive feature, the ascent of his whole household, since the rat's resentment would otherwise have no basis. As we survey the available record of Tang Gongfang's translocal reception, it becomes unclear whether Tang's story traveled widely because of interest in the rat, or whether the rat was widely talked about because it was hitched to Tang's story. But it is clear that interest in the rat helped spread and preserve the story of Tang's signature exploit. The rat's story became a vector by which Tang's story was picked up more often in translocal texts than it otherwise might have been. The rat element of the story has also undergone a strange transformation between the inscription and the *Treatise on Curiosities*:

66. This is not to imply, of course, that the Eastern Han stele was necessarily the sole or even the primary agent in spreading Tang's story, only that it was one known agent (with known sponsors) in a process that must remain mostly invisible to us.

67. In *Bowuzhi jiaozheng*, 125 (fragment 80), quoted in *YWLJ* 95:1659. The passage does not occur in the received versions of the text.

68. See *SW*, 127–128.

69. In traditional medical theory, resentment was associated with the gall bladder, a fact which probably bears some relation to the rat's anatomy and story.

the inscription mentions no bizarre anatomy and does not locate the rat at Tang's household. It does, however, show Tang cutting open its belly to recover the canopy top. Even in the inscription, then, the rat figures in the story because of its abdomen.

The next extant trace of Tang Gongfang's translocal reception occurs in the hagiography of Li Babai 李八百 (Li Eight Hundred) attributed to *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*.

Li Babai was a native of Shu. No one knew his given name. Successive generations had seen him, and people of the day calculated his age to be 800, hence his sobriquet. Sometimes he secluded himself in the mountains, and sometimes he appeared in the markets.

He knew that Tang Gongfang of Hanzhong had determination [to study the Way] but had not found an enlightened teacher. Li wished to teach Tang and transmit texts to him, so he first went to test him. He pretended to be a hired servant, and Tang Gongfang did not realize [who he really was]. Li hustled about his work and was diligent, quite different from other hired personnel; Tang was fond of him and wondered at him. Li then pretended to fall ill and to be near death.

After thus deploying the common tropes, first of recognition (in this case a master's recognition of the latent promise of a potential disciple), then of testing, the hagiography gives a vivid account of these tests, an account quoted in Chapter 4: Li's body develops festering sores; a doctor cannot cure him; Li requests first Tang's household maidservants, then Tang himself, and then his wife to lick the sores for him, followed by the crowning request of an enormous quantity of fine wine to bathe in—all of this simply to test Tang's character. The narrative resumes:

Li then declared to Tang, "I am a transcendent. You possess determination, so I have tested you by these means, and you have truly proven worthy to be taught. I will now transmit to you instructions for transcending the world." He then had Tang, his wife, and the three maidservants who had licked him bathe in the wine he himself had bathed in, and they all reverted to youth, their countenances perfect and pleasing. Afterwards he transmitted a scripture on elixirs in one fascicle to Tang. Tang entered Mount Yuntai [Cloud Terrace Mountain⁷⁰] to make the drug. When it was complete, he ingested it and departed as a transcendent.⁷¹

70. Perhaps the mountain that is meant here is the one otherwise known as Tianzhu shan (Celestial Pillar Mountain) in Cangxi district, Sichuan Province, where Zhang Ling engaged in Celestial Master practice and which is mentioned in Zhang's *Traditions* hagiography as the site of one of his trials of his disciples. (There was another Tianzhu shan in modern Anhui Province.) Three other mountains named Yuntai are located in modern Jiangsu and Anhui Provinces.

71. *TL*, 215–218, 432–433.

Ge Hong, we see,⁷² does not feel bound to mention Tang's rat. He uses the case of Tang Gongfang to do three things: emphasize Li Babai's perspicacity in recognizing this householder as a promising disciple; illustrate the depth of commitment and strength of character a would-be disciple must have in order to receive a transmission of esoterica; and document the efficacy of elixir alchemy, Ge's preferred route to transcendence.⁷³ Nothing is said of Tang's whole household ascending with him. But there is a detail in the story that may be read as a subtle nod to that element of the body of narrative that must have been circulating by the early fourth century: Li has not only Tang but also his wife and their three maidservants bathe in the wine Li has bathed in, and "they all reverted to youth, their countenances perfect and pleasing." This reversion to youth is not celestial transcendence, but it is a striking longevity-enhancing achievement that is here credited to members of Tang's household other than Tang himself. It is as if, Tang being known primarily for having taken his household with him into the skies, Ge must mention this element. On the other hand, Ge, with his agenda of promoting alchemical elixirs as the most effective and prestigious path to *xian*-hood, clearly distinguishes between the wife and maidservants' mere "reversion to youth," induced by the wine bath, and Tang's departure into transcendence, which alone in this story is induced by a true elixir. Ge is willing to split up the household to argue the unique efficacy of elixirs (and of the scriptures that teach proper methods for making them). Ge may also have been reluctant to allow that elixirs might be used for something so base as the celestial levitation of an entire household, domestic animals and all. He does include such a substory in another hagiography, but only as an apparent addition to the narrative's end and introduced with the words, "Legend has it," which rhetorically puts some distance between the author-compiler and the content thus framed.

Chang Qu 常璩 (fl. 347 C.E.) in his *Huayangguo zhi* 華陽國志 (*Annals of the Kingdoms South of Mount Hua*) notes in passing a shrine to Tang Gongfang that was enough of an attraction in Baozhong 褒中 district, Mianyang 沔陽 commandery, to be the only feature of that place listed in this topography.⁷⁴ There was still apparently a shrine standing in the middle of the fourth century, then, at the site where Guo

72. If, that is, this hagiography can be safely attributed to his own compiling and editing work. The *Shenxian zhuan* material on Li and Tang is attested fairly early (see *TL*, 432–433), but here, as is the case with virtually every text from this period, it will always remain impossible to know with certainty that the original autograph text (if it even makes sense, in a manuscript culture in which authors themselves must have produced multiple versions and copies of texts over their lifetimes, to use this phrase) contained this particular entry. At best we deal in probabilities.

73. See *TL*, 30.

74. *Huayangguo zhi* 2:124. The district seat was located on the Bao River just north of where it joined the Han River, northwest of the present-day city of Hanzhong (which is also the site of the ancient Hanzhong commandery seat).

Zhi and his colleagues had sponsored work a century or two earlier. Chang does not pause to record Tang's story, but this should not surprise us since his work is quite laconic. Another early medieval topography, however, of uncertain date and authorship,⁷⁵ *Liangzhou ji* 梁州記, is more expansive:

North of the Zhi [?] River is Zhi[?]xiang Mountain. On it is a shrine to the transcendent Tang Gongfang. There is a stele, and just north of the temple is a large hole. The stele says that this was the site of his former house; when Gongfang lifted up his household and ascended into transcendence, it left a hole there. On the mountain there is a "guts-changing rat." Three times a month it vomits and thus changes out its guts. This is what Shu Guangwei 東廣微⁷⁶ called Tang's rat.⁷⁷

The stele described here must have been a different one than that commissioned by Guo Zhi and colleagues. (It would not have been unusual for a shrine to have more than one stele on its grounds.) In fact, this passage probably describes a different shrine and location, though one in the same region. Through the text we glimpse a local community making the most of its association with Tang, placing a shrine at the site claimed to be his former residence that no doubt attracted pious pilgrims and curious tourists who gaped at the hole in the ground near the temple. The periodicity of the rat's odd transformation, and its linkage to the lunar cycle, suggest a kind of earthbound transcendence (or at least rejuvenation) in its own right, albeit without the finality of an elixir. The focal interest of this particular topographic text is the shrine itself, the hole near it, and especially the rat because these all constitute notable local wonders. Shrines to transcendents could be found in many places, but the hole and the strange local rat set this one apart. This text summarizes the story of Tang's ascent in one sentence, perhaps presuming its readers already know the tale; its attention is focused elsewhere. It evinces no interest whatsoever in the back-story of Tang's achievement, the trials he had to endure, nor in the specific practices, alchemical or otherwise, that enabled his ascent.

In the medium Yang Xi's Shangqing transcriptions of 364–370, collected around 500 by Tao Hongjing into *Declarations of the Perfected* (*Zhen'gao* 真誥), Tang

75. It probably, however, dates to no later than the early fifth century, because it (or at least a work of the same title) is twice cited in Fan Ye's *Hou Han shu*.

76. Shu Xi 皙 (ca. 264–ca. 303 C.E.) was a scholar-official famous for his broad learning. He was an acquaintance and official appointee of Zhang Hua and was involved in the editing and transcribing of the ancient texts found in the Ji tomb around 279. On Shu Xi, see *Jin shu* 51:1427–1434; and on the Ji tomb texts and Shu's work with them, see Shaughnessy, *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts*, 131–256 passim.

77. Cited in *YWLJ* 95:1658–1659.

Gongfang is, along with a great many other figures from the past, located by the Perfected in a particular station in the heavens. We learn that he holds an office overseeing records of life and death.⁷⁸ One of this text's overriding agendas is to make a hierarchy of competing religious methods, values, and exemplars by reshuffling the statuses of figures earlier claimed to have become *xian* (as well as certain of the ordinary dead); it does so, in part, by locating them in particular strata of a conveniently complex, hierarchically organized bureaucratic pantheon, and by investing this information with the status of divine revelation. Tang's sponsors might have been glad to learn that he was mentioned by the Perfected who appeared to Yang Xi and was thus recognized as holding divine office; on the other hand, they might have been chagrined that their regional patron had not climbed farther up the promotion ladder. This sort of *Zhen'gao* passage is a corrective to the hagiographies of others, a translocal (because divinely revealed) tamping down of a crowd of local figures enthusiastically boosted and anxiously inquired about by their sponsors, devotees, and relatives.

Sometime in the early fifth century, Liu Jingshu 劉敬叔, in his *Garden of Marvels* (*Yiyuan* 異苑), a large collection of anomaly accounts, included a notice on the Tang rat in a series of entries on the strange fauna of particular regions.⁷⁹

The Tang rat is shaped like a typical rat. It has a rather long tail and is of a greenish-black color. On the side of its belly is an appendage resembling intestines, which sometimes grows discolored and falls off. The rat is thus also called "changing-its-guts rat." Formerly the transcendent Tang Fang took his household and ascended into the heavens. His chickens and dogs all went with him. Only a rat fell back down. It did not die, but its guts now protruded three inches. It changes them every three years. It's commonly called Tang's rat. It lives in Chenggu and the Sichuan area.⁸⁰

This is an account of anomalies; it describes things deemed strange. By the fifth century there was little that was strange, at least to a compiler of oddities, about a transcendent per se: they were a fixture of the common cultural *imaginaire*. From this text's perspective, Tang stands out among transcendents only because he "took his household," so that is the only feature mentioned. The entry quickly returns to its real subject of interest, the rat; we now get a more detailed anatomical description (along with a new schedule for the changing of its guts). But the rat's odd features cannot be accounted for without some reference to Tang's ascent. Here it is

78. *DZ* 1016, 13.13a4–6.

79. On this work and author, see *SW*, 78–80.

80. *Yiyuan* 3.29, cited in *TPCJ* 440:13.

an injury suffered in its fall as Tang's house rose upward, not its resentment at being left behind, that accounts for those features.

The final item in our series is Li Daoyuan's (d. 527) *Annotated Classic of Waterways*, a topographic text that generously appends both narrative and descriptive material to the old *Water Classic's* laconic listings of rivers and lakes. Li's work is invaluable for sketching some of the stories that were circulating (often on stelae) in *particular places* in the early sixth century. It is in the context of mentioning the Xu River 壻水 that the text notes the existence of a Tang Gongfang shrine near its banks.

There is a Tang Gong shrine there. Lord Tang was styled Gongfang and was a native of Chenggu. He practiced a *dao* and became a transcendent, entering Mount Yuntai to synthesize and ingest an elixir. He ascended into the heavens in broad daylight. His cocks now crow in the heavens and his dogs bark in the clouds.⁸¹ He left only a rat behind, due to its noxiousness. The rat was vexed at this and began spitting up its guts on the last of every month, and growing new ones. So people today call it Tang's rat.

On the day Gongfang ascended and became a transcendent, his son-in-law was traveling and had not yet returned. He was unable to use the same path into the clouds that the others had. So he had to content himself with making this river his residence. It is said that there is no trouble with killing frosts, krakens, or tigers in the area. The local people credit him with this.⁸² This is why [the town] is called Xu [Son-in-law] Village. This is also where the river here gets its name. The hundred surnames⁸³ have established a temple for him on this spot. They carved this stone and erected this stele to make manifest and spread word of these numinous wonders.⁸⁴

Li is here, as elsewhere in his text, likely drawing on one or more stele inscriptions at the site.⁸⁵ The first paragraph compresses most elements we have seen so far—the elixir, the whole-household ascent (though this is only elliptically referred to), the rat—into one brief account. The second paragraph introduces what is to us new material on Tang's son-in-law, another figure left behind as the household ascended, who seems in his own right—perhaps between the Eastern Han and the

81. The same phrase is used in some accounts of Liu An, as will be seen below.

82. That is, believed that Tang's son-in-law was responsible for these blessings in their area.

83. Usually meaning "commoners," but here simply designating the local population in general.

84. *Shuijing zhu* 27:353.

85. The modern editor compares the text's wording at certain points with those of inscriptions recorded elsewhere.

early fifth century—to have become the focus of a secondary cult in the area. Just as Tang lent his name to the strange rat, his otherwise unnamed son-in-law lent his family title to the local town and even the river that runs by it. Transcendence is not claimed for him, but he has clearly acceded to the status of regional deity, credited by local people with assistance in matters of weather and harmful animals just as his transcendent father-in-law had been two or more centuries before. He may have been granted cult status because of the dangerous power of his perceived resentment at having been left behind. Li is as interested in this figure as he is in Tang, for whom a shrine still stood at or near its old site in the early sixth century.

The case of Tang Gongfang and his rat shows, then, how widely a complex of originally local narrative elements, inscribed on stone, could be taken up and refracted in translocal genres of several kinds.

Hagiographic Rehabilitation

Hagiography, which is among other things an exercise in reputation-shaping through narration, can be used to argue for a lessening of a holy person's reputation. Several transcendents whose stories Ge Hong included in his *Traditions* were, in discourses divinely vouchsafed fifty years later to Yang Xi and then collected by Tao Hongjing in *Declarations of the Perfected* around 500 C.E., argued to hold far less prestigious positions in the celestial bureaucracy than Ge's narrative had suggested and new, derogatory (though not entirely debunking) information now had the added support of the divine revelation. Hagiography could also be used to refurbish, realign, exalt, defend, upgrade, or totally remake a figure's reputation—or rather, to *argue* for these adjustments, the outcome always depending on readers' reception. No upgrade was quite so dramatic as claiming that someone who was elsewhere maintained to have died had in fact not perished but rather lived on as a transcendent. This rhetorical strategy, as we have seen, dovetailed with the lore surrounding techniques of *shijie* (escape by means of a simulated corpse) and *bingjie* (escape by feigned execution or staged violent death); in a society in which such techniques were reputed to be widely practiced, any apparent death, however seemingly final or graphic, was a candidate for reappraisal. This was especially so when the protagonist in question was said to have practiced or advocated transcendence arts. In such cases not only might an argument for transcendence carry plausibility in the eyes of some readers, there was also likely to be some pressure in that direction from caretakers of the protagonist's post mortem reputation. And so a figure reported in some quarters to have died might be argued in other texts to be living on as a *xian* in the heavens or on earth—the ultimate in hagiographic rehabilitation.

Ji Kang (223–262 C.E.), the noted poet, essayist, and zither virtuoso, was one such figure. Widely said⁸⁶ to have been imprisoned and executed in 262 C.E., he had also left behind treatises on the possibility of transcendence.⁸⁷ His reputation seems to have become heavily contested: he clearly had sponsors who wanted to see him admitted to the ranks of transcendents, but he also had detractors who wanted to keep him out. Several texts go to some lengths to point out Ji Kang's limitations as a practitioner, as does the hagiography of Wang Lie 王烈 attributed to Ge Hong's *Traditions*. In the Wang Lie story, a stony, longevity-inducing substance, then an esoteric text written in a strange script, spontaneously appear to Wang but mysteriously become unavailable when he tries to share them with Ji. Lest we miss the point, the hagiography drives it home: "Wang privately told one of his disciples that these things happened because Ji had not yet become fit to attain the Way."⁸⁸ Again, the same text's hagiography of Sun Deng 孫登 portrays that master as commenting on Ji Kang's unfitness for sustained esoteric practice—and for good measure throws in a scene in which Sun outplays Ji on the zither.⁸⁹ But a third passage in the same text—the hagiography of Ge's own father-in-law, Bao Jing—contains a passage implying that Ji, though apparently executed in 262, was still alive strumming his zither in Bao's own company long after that event.⁹⁰ The implication is that Ji's apparent execution had been an instance of "escape by weapon" and that he was still roaming the earth as a transcendent of some grade or other. The presence of divergent estimations of the same figure in a single hagiographic collection—although some or all of them were probably added to some *Traditions* copies by hands other than Ge Hong's—is testimony both to the fluidity of texts in a manuscript culture and to the literary struggle waged by many unseen parties over the reputations of former figures.⁹¹ (It also serves to remind us of how risky it is to form conclusions about the inner mental proclivities of a particular author—Ge Hong in this case—based on a few textual passages surviving from a manuscript culture.) Clearly there were circles in which Ji Kang was regarded as a transcendent; both the positive and the negative evaluations

86. For example, in *Jin shu* 49. For a discussion of the historiographic sources on him, see Holzman, *La vie et la pensée de Hi K'ang*, 12–51.

87. See Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China*, 21–70.

88. *TL*, 339.

89. *Ibid.*, 336; see also Campany, "Two Religious Thinkers of the Early Eastern Jin," 207–208.

90. *TL*, 295–297.

91. For two very different studies of the implications of manuscript culture for the study of premodern Chinese texts, see Tian, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture*; and Shaughnessy, *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts*.

of him in *Traditions* go to prove this.⁹² Portrayals of his shortcomings as an adept would have had no point unless someone was telling stories of his success in transcendence arts—and unless someone else wanted to counter these stories.

In the case of Liu An 劉安, a prince of the Han dynasty historically recorded as having died in 122 B.C.E., we have much more explicit traces of a literary debate that raged for more than four centuries.⁹³ All sources agree that Liu, a grandson of the founding Han emperor and uncle of Emperor Wu, gathered masters of esoteric knowledge at his principedom in Huainan, that these scholars jointly authored the massive compendium *Huainanzi* under Liu's sponsorship, and that in 122 he was charged with treason for taking potent symbolic steps toward the proclamation of a new dynasty, to which he was moved in part by resentment over his family's treatment by the court. Sometime in the century and a half between Liu An's reported demise in 122 B.C.E. and Wang Chong's (27–97 C.E.) authoring of his *Arguments Weighed* (*Lunheng* 論衡), someone began spreading word that Liu had not in fact died, but had instead ascended into the heavens as a transcendent by means of an alchemical elixir—and that his entire household had ascended along with him.⁹⁴ We know this because it is the substance of the narrative Wang Chong summarizes in order to debunk:

Literati books say that the prince of Huainan studied *daos* and assembled all in the realm who had a *dao*. From the worthies of the land to masters of *dao* arts, all gathered in Huainan. Whatever strange methods and anomalous arts they had, all were put forth. The prince therefore obtained *daos* and, along with his household, ascended into the heavens. Even his livestock and domestic animals attained transcendence; his dogs and chickens were in the heavens as well and barked and crowed in the clouds. This is to say that there were some *xian* drugs left over; the dogs and chickens ate these, so they all followed the prince upward into the heavens.

92. For a study of other narratives concerning his relations with practitioners of transcendence arts, see Chan, "Ruan Ji's and Xi Kang's Visits to Two 'Immortals.'"

93. The best discussion in English of the historiographical (but not hagiographic) material on Liu An may be found in Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han & Xin Periods*, 242–244.

94. Neither the *Shi ji* (see, for example, 118:3082) nor Ban Gu's *Han shu* (see, for example, 44:2145), compiled in the second half of the second century C.E., in their brief accounts of Liu An make any mention of his alleged personal attainment of transcendence, though both do mention his collection of masters of esoterica in Huainan, and the *Han shu* narrative mentions that the texts emanating from An's circle "spoke of arts of divine transcendence and the yellow and white" (that is, alchemy, 44:2145).

All those who are fond of *daos* and study transcendence say that this is so.
It's all false.

Note Wang's penultimate comment on the ubiquity with which this story was transmitted among practitioners of *xian* arts; clearly Liu An had been appropriated by many *xian*-hood seekers as a successful exemplar. At this point in his text Wang Chong launches several arguments against the possibility of transcendence in general. The most basic is a syllogism: human beings are creatures; all creatures must die; therefore all humans must die. Another argument is taxonomic: the verbal and visual lore of transcendents pictures them as feathered, but feathers are not natural to humankind. After developing these and similar arguments, Wang returns to the case of Liu An:

In fact, Liu An, prince of Huainan, lived during the reign of [Han] Emperor Wu. His father, Chang, had been banished to Yandao in Shu and died on reaching Yongdao. Liu An inherited the principedom and, resenting that his father had been driven to his death, harbored thoughts of rebellion; his summoning and assembling men with arts was because he wanted to launch a great affair [that is, launch a new dynasty]. Wu Pi and the others filled the palace halls and wrote treatises on *dao* arts, putting forth all sorts of deviant and strange writings. They joined together in plotting rebellion.⁹⁵ The story of the Eight Sires was intended to display their divine marvels, to make it appear as if they had obtained *daos*, but their *daos* in the end were not realized and proved ineffective. And so [An] plotted rebellion with Wu Pi, but the affair came to light and An committed suicide. Some say he was executed; whether he was executed or committed suicide, the reality is the same. Over the generations, people, on seeing these men's writings, deep, dark, and strange, and again upon contemplating the story of the Eight Sires, which made it seem as though they had achieved some results, came to transmit the claim that the prince of Huainan had transcended and ascended to the heavens, but this departs from the facts of the case.⁹⁶

Wang Chong presumes his readers' familiarity with the subnarrative of the Eight Sires (*bagong* 八公); he does not even bother to summarize it, despite having told the story of Liu An's own supposed celestial ascent. He here offers a theory of the origin of the story of Liu's transcendence: the combination of the impressively abstruse content of the text now known as *Huainanzi* and the Sires' striking exploits

95. The text is corrupt here; I follow the suggestion of various commentators in amending it.

96. *Lunheng jiaoshi* 7:317–318, 319–320. An alternate translation may be found in Forke, *Lun-hêng*, 1:337–338.

led some to conclude that Liu An must have become a *xian* despite records to the contrary.

Moving forward another century and a half, we find Ying Shao 應劭 in his *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義, probably written between 194 and 206, including Liu An's story as one of the canards he must rectify in his chapter "Correcting Errors" ("Zhengshi" 正失):

It is said by the vulgar that An, prince of Huainan, summoned several thousand masters of esoteric arts as guests; wrote the *Swan's Jewel* and *Myriad Secrets*,⁹⁷ both esoteric texts; and completed [alchemical] gold and silver in a cauldron, thus ascending to the heavens in broad daylight.

Ying Shao then quotes from Liu An's biography in the *Han shu* to the effect that when alchemical efforts at his court failed to produce an efficacious elixir, he began forging imperial seals and tallies and for this reason was publicly charged with treason, whereupon he committed suicide.

He fell on his own sword, and his family was publicly executed. How can any of them be said to have become divine transcendents? As for the masters he was hosting, some of them probably escaped and, ashamed at how things had turned out, glossed them over with a false account (*shi zha shuo* 飾詐說) that later people picked up and spread so that it became transmitted and circulated.⁹⁸

Just as Wang Chong had counterposed a class of written sources he distrusts—in his case "literati books" (*ru shu* 儒書)—to an authority he relies on to correct their mistakes—in his case, clear thinking about how the world works—so Ying Shao begins by citing one kind of source and then countering it with another kind he presents as more trustworthy. In Ying's case the suspect source is "a saying of the vulgar" (*su shuo* 俗說). (Perhaps we might soften it to "a common saying," but the pejorative whiff of *su*, "vulgar, common, ordinary," is unmistakable, especially in Ying's prose.) The more authoritative source applied as a corrective is Ban Gu's *History of the Han*, here treated as a sober, classic, *true* account against which common asseverations can safely be measured. In Wang Chong's case, the suspect sources cited were books, whose falsehoods could be sorted out through thinking; in Ying Shao's case, quite typically for him, the questionable source is a type of "saying"—not necessarily something strictly oral in its medium, but not necessarily something

97. The text has *Yuanmi* 苑秘, which makes little sense; I amend the title to fit what is given in other sources.

98. *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* chap. 2, 115–117.

in writing, either—and the authority is a *book* that Ying trusts and wants us to trust too. Just as Wang had his theory to account for the origin of the false narrative, Ying has his too. Wang's theory was cognitive: people not involved in the events, realizing the profundities of the writings emanating from Liu An's circle and hearing of his teacher-companions' exploits, came to credit Liu An with transcendence because this seemed a more reasonable, likely end for such a man than political execution or suicide. Ying's theory, again quite characteristically, is psychological and moral: the shame (*chi* 耻) of the whole affair led some from Liu's circle of masters to "gloss things over with a false account" that came to circulate among those far enough removed in time and space from the events that it came to seem true.

Zhang Hua (232–300 C.E.) in his late-third-century *Treatise on Curiosities* was content simply to record both sides of the still-running argument: "The Han prince of Huainan was executed for plotting rebellion. But it is also said he obtained a *dao* and ascended upward." The location of this item in Zhang's encyclopedic text is itself of interest: it heads the section titled "Disputations concerning Masters of Esoterica" ("Bian fangshi" 辨方士),⁹⁹ which is devoted to recording differences of opinion concerning particular practitioners of esoteric arts. We may infer that by the late third century Liu An's was the paramount case of a sharply disputed reputation of transcendence.

The account of Liu An attributed to Ge Hong's *Traditions*, then, was a quite self-conscious wading into a high-profile controversy of long standing. Almost certainly based on earlier sources now lost, it provides for the first time in the extant record a glimpse of the full narrative details to which the earlier, debunking passages only summarily refer.¹⁰⁰

Liu An, prince of Huainan, was a grandson of Han Emperor Gao.¹⁰¹ He was fond of literati studies and of esoteric skills. He wrote an *Inner Book* (*Neishu* 内书¹⁰²) in twenty-one chapters; he also authored "central chapters" (*zhongpian* 中篇) in eight sections, which spoke of matters concerning divine transcen-

99. *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* 64; this is item number 192 in the sequence, in chap. 5.

100. Further details are on record in a contemporaneous text, Gan Bao's *Record of an Inquest into the Spirit-Realm* (*Soushen ji*), in which item 1:15 records a song Liu An is reported to have sung on meeting the Sires.

101. That is, Gao zu or "the Exalted Progenitor," the founder of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang (reigned 202–195 B.C.E.).

102. This is the work now known as *Huainanzi*, which still exists in twenty-one chapters (one important recension is preserved in the Ming Daoist canon as DZ 1184); *Inner Book* was its original name because it formed the esoteric part of a trilogy of collections of essays. For more on this designation and its history, see Roth, *Textual History*, 12, 16, 20, 23. Scholars agree that Liu An did not independently write this and the other treatises listed here; rather, these works were written at his court by masters he had assembled.

dents and the “yellow and white”¹⁰³ and were titled *The Swan’s Jewel* (*Hongbao* 鴻寶). And he wrote the *Myriad Ends* (*Wanbi* 萬畢) in three fascicles, which discussed ways of transformation.¹⁰⁴

There were Eight Sires¹⁰⁵ who went to call on him. The gatekeeper, acting on his own initiative, harried them with questions, saying, “The prince’s foremost desire is to obtain ways of extending one’s years, forestalling the time [of one’s death], [getting] long life, and non-aging. His next desire is to obtain great scholars who are broadly learned and can enter into the subtle meanings [of texts]. And his last desire is to obtain brave, stalwart warriors with the strength to lift cauldrons and the ferocity to scare off tigers. Now you gentlemen are already decrepit. Obviously you possess neither the arts with which to forestall your decline nor the [natural] strength of a [Meng] Ben or a [Xia] Yu.¹⁰⁶ How could you penetrate [matters such as those discussed in] the *Three Tombs* (*Sanfen*), *Five Exemplars* (*Wudian*), *Eight Cords* (*Basu*), or *Nine Hills* (*Jiuqiu*), or reach matters of the utmost depth and remoteness, or exhaust hidden principles and natures? And since you fall short in these areas, I dare not proceed further.”

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

103. That is, matters of gold and silver, or alchemy.

104. See *TL*, 233–234 and 442–447, for comments on these titles, which need not detain us here.

105. A passage in *Ge’s Inner Chapters* (*NP* 11:208) may reflect a later development of these figures. It names “eight transcendent sires” (*xianren bagong* 仙人八公), describing their regimens and resulting esoteric skills. The skills do not match up closely with the ones described here.

106. Meng Ben and Xia Yu are two heroes of Warring States times whose names became synonymous with bravery. The several other historical allusions and mentions of obscure texts below are explained in the annotations in *TL*; I omit them here.

As soon as they had spoken these words, the Eight Sires transformed into youths of fifteen with elaborately coiffed black hair and skin the color of peach blossoms. At this, the gatekeeper was shocked and ran to inform the prince. Upon hearing the news, the prince immediately rushed out to greet them, not even stopping to put on his shoes. Together they climbed the Longing for Transcendence Tower, where [the prince] spread out brocade canopies and ivory mats, lit hundred-harmonies incense, brought out stools of gold and jade, and comported himself as a disciple. Facing north,¹⁰⁷ he folded his hands and said, "Despite my only average talent, I have loved the Dao and its Power since my youth. But I am reined and fettered by the affairs of this world. Mired among the common run of humanity, I am unable to leave behind my ties, shoulder a satchel, and dwell in mountains and forests. Nevertheless, morning and night I have hungered and thirsted after divine illumination and the cleansing of my defilements. My dedication has been shallow, my ambition unfulfilled, and [my goals lie] as distant as the Milky Way. I did not expect to receive such great favor as this descent and visit from you lords of the Dao. It must be due to [what is written in] the register of my allotted lifespan that I am being thus promoted. Confronted by both joy and fear, I do not know what to do; I only beg you lords of the Dao to take pity on me and teach me, that I might, like a caterpillar who borrows a swan's wings, depart from earth and fly up to heaven!"

At this, the Eight Sires changed back into old men and declared to the prince: "Although our knowledge, too, is shallow, we are each equipped with what we have previously studied. Knowing that you love the Dao, we have come to attend you, but we do not yet know which [of our arts] interests you. One of us can sit and summon wind and rain, stand and call up clouds and fog, draw on the ground to form rivers, and pile up soil to form mountains. One of us can topple mountains, plug up springs, tame tigers and leopards, summon dragons and krakens, and dispatch spirits and ghosts. One of us can divide himself into multiple bodies, alter his countenance, appear and disappear at will, conceal the six [types of] troops, and bring on darkness in broad daylight. One of us can ride in emptiness, pace the void, cross over the ocean waves, enter and exit where there is no open space, and go a thousand *li* in a single breath. One of us can enter fire without being burned, enter water without getting wet, take knife blows without being cut, get shot at without being pierced, not feel cold in the depths of summer and not sweat in the height of summer. One of us can transform himself in a myriad ways, become whatever he pleases, turn into a bird, beast, plant, or tree in an instant, move all manner of creatures and

107. To face north was to assume the lower position in a hierarchy of social and religious authority.

land formations at will, and transport palaces and houses. One of us can quell fires, rescue others from danger, avoid all manner of calamities, extend his years, and lengthen his lifespan [to reach] long life. And one of us can decoct clay to form gold, distill lead to form mercury, refine the eight minerals, fly aloft with the ‘flowing pearl,’¹⁰⁸ ride dragons hitched to cloud[-carriages], and drift and wander about in the [Heaven of] Grand Purity. [Which arts you study] depends entirely on your desire.”

From this point on, An paid obeisance to the Eight Sires day and night, personally serving them liquor and fruit. Before [studying] each art, he asked for a demonstration of it; all of them—the transformations, the winds, rains, clouds, and fogs—proved effective. So he came to receive from the Sires a scripture on elixirs,¹⁰⁹ [one on] thirty-six esoteric methods involving “liquid silver,” and others.

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

Legend has it that, as An was in the process of departing as a transcendent, there was a bit of his medicinal compound left over in a basin in the court. His chickens and dogs pecked at or licked out the basin and they all flew upwards as well.¹¹⁰

This account is careful to defend Liu An against the charge of treason; it mentions in passing that the accusation was false but also slyly uses it as the narrative turn that triggers Liu’s group ascension into the heavens. It certainly credits Liu with celestial transcendence, but mostly it focuses on the Eight Sires (who here ascend with Liu) and on Liu’s deferential, self-deprecating response to their arrival at his gate—a response that modeled the way in which practitioners of esoterica hoped to be welcomed by high officials. It includes, seemingly as a nod to the most widely known element of Liu’s story, the ascent of his domestic animals in his wake. This detail is certainly comedic, but in this context it also constitutes an argument for the power of elixirs: they are so effective that they can convey even dogs and chickens to transcendence.

So much for the counter-narrative offered in *Traditions* to earlier debunkings of Liu An’s claimed *xian*-hood. Ge Hong also recorded counter-narratives to this counter-narrative. The reader will recall Ge’s *Inner Chapters* account of one Xiang

108. Denoting some sort of alchemical product; see the annotation in *TL*, 237, for details.

109. Or perhaps “a scripture on cinnabar.”

110. *TL*, 233–240, 442–447.

Mandu, who told colorful tales of his celestial adventures in quest of transcendence and whom Ge considered a charlatan.¹¹¹ Among the details Xiang is said to have recounted we find this one:

In former times when Liu An, prince of Huainan, ascended to the heavens for an audience with the Thearch on High, he sat spread-legged, spoke loudly, and referred to himself as “I, the single man.” For this he was assigned to guard the celestial latrine for three years.¹¹²

Although Ge Hong dismisses Xiang’s entire narration as so much nonsense, for us this detail is a valuable instance of recorded oral counter-narrative, surprisingly complex for being so brief.¹¹³ On the one hand, it grants that Liu An ascended into the heavens, to this extent agreeing with the side that favored transcendence in the long-running debate (though whether the story is attributing full-blown transcendence to Liu, or only a temporary ascent, is unclear). But on the other hand it irreverently charges Liu with a grave lapse of manners. This portrayal echoes the old charges of treason and undermines the hagiographic insistence on his deference toward the Sires in its clever suggestion that he never shed his overweening, presumptuous attitude, even in the heavens. The form of self-reference here attributed to the prince—“I, the single man”—was reserved for rulers; it was not a prerogative that Liu An had legitimately enjoyed on earth and was certainly not one he should have presumed in heaven before the celestial Thearch. His other behaviors are likewise laughably inappropriate: he speaks too loudly, and his spread-legged seated posture, literally “like a winnowing basket,” was used to ward off demons; by Han times it was understood as a gesture of contempt and was thus expressly prohibited by the rules of gentlemanly etiquette given in the *Book of Rites*.¹¹⁴ The courteous prince of the *Traditions* account, whose one overriding characteristic is appropriate deference to his spiritual betters, is here deftly refigured not only as boorish but, worse, as arrogant and presumptuous: he carries his overreaching tendencies up to heaven with him and pays a stiff price there as here.

In the *Traditions* hagiography we saw this detail in the celestial ascent scene: “Imprints were made in the mountain stone on which they [last] stepped, and today the tracks of humans and of horses are still visible there.” The passage reminds us that the reputations of *xian*, the cycles of stories of their exploits, were anchored

111. Discussed in Chapter 5.

112. *NP* 20:350.

113. One detects a bit of class warfare, with the haughty prince being taken down several notches, but without information on Xiang Mandu’s social background it is impossible to do more than speculate on this aspect of the narrative.

114. See Harper, “A Chinese Demonography of the Third Century B.C.,” 483–485.

to particular sites on the landscape; sometimes, as here, they were literally embedded or inscribed in the ground. This passing mention in the *Traditions* almost certainly indicates that a cult site dedicated to Liu An and the Eight Sires had already been established in the Huainan area by Ge Hong's day. In Li Daoyuan's *Annotated Classic of Waterways* we have valuable eyewitness testimony to the existence of this site at the end of the fifth century. After remarking that "Ge Hong realized that [Liu An] had attained the Dao, and he included the matter in his *Master Who Embraces the Unhewn* and *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*," Li Daoyuan describes his visit to the temple to Liu An on Eight Sires Mountain in or near Shouchun 壽春 district:

I climbed to the top of the mountain. I heard nothing of the tracks of men and horses, and only the temple [and its] image were still extant. In the temple was drawn an image of An and the Eight Sires. They were shown seated casually under a canopy, all dressed in beautiful gowns and feathered cloaks. Their mats, bottles, and pillows were all like ordinary ones. In front of the temple is a stele that was erected in the tenth year of the *yongming* reign period of the Qi dynasty [late 492 or early 493 C.E.]. The mountain has hidden chambers and stone wells. . . . Climbing the northern peak, you see the *dao* chamber of [the prince of] Huainan and, near it, the Eight Sires' stone well.¹¹⁵

In modern Fengtai district, Anhui Province, there is an Eight Sires Mountain, presumably the one Ge's account mentions and Li tells of having climbed. I have not yet ventured there to see whether a temple to Liu An still stands, but I suspect it does.

Hagiographic Co-Optation

Hagiographic refashioning of reputations could be extreme. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the outright stealing of figures from other traditions to be remade, in some busy workshop of textual production, into advocates for transcendence arts or even transcendents themselves.

Outright stealing occurs in the treatment of the Han courtier and author Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (who probably died between 119 and 114 B.C.E.) in the *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* hagiography of Li Shaojun.¹¹⁶ The hagiography itself aptly summarizes Dong's stance on the pursuit of transcendence as recorded in histories:

115. *Shuijing zhu* 32:407. Compare the citation of this passage in *TPYL* 43:6b.

116. The best recent summary in English of Dong's official biographies may be found in Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han & Xin Periods*, 70–73; for an excellent study of his political and cosmological thought, see Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon*.

He had studied the Five Classics extensively but had never attained an understanding of *dao* arts. He often scoffed at people of the world for ingesting drugs and practicing *daos*. He presented memorials to Emperor Wu arguing that human life was limited by an allotted lifespan and that aging was a naturally given process, such that it could not be lengthened by *dao* arts. He maintained that even if there were apparent exceptions to this rule, they were due to natural endowment, not to arts.¹¹⁷

This recorded stance, however, along with Dong's attendance at the court of an emperor famous for his interest in esoteric arts, only made him a tempting target for advocates of the quest for *xian*-hood. The hagiography tells of how Dong's "close friend" Li Shaojun had made a medicine from a secret recipe for Dong before departing from court for good. Later, when Dong was gravely ill, he remembered this medicine.

He tried taking less than half a dose: his body grew light and strong, and his illness was suddenly healed. Then he took a full dose: his breath and strength were as they had been when he was young. Only now did he believe that there was a way of long life and deathlessness. He quit his official post and traveled in search of a master of a *dao* whom he could ask about the method [for making the drug he had taken]. He never succeeded in grasping all of it; he only managed to prevent his hair from going white and to stay very healthy. Only when he was more than eighty years old did he finally die. Before he died, he told his son, Daosheng, "When I was still young, I obtained Li Shaojun's esoteric medicine. At first I didn't believe in it; after using it, I regained strength, but then I was never able to grasp [the method for making] it. I will carry my regret over this with me to the Yellow Springs [that is, to the realm of the dead]. You must go and search out a master of esoterica, someone who can explain this method. If you persist in taking this medicine, you will certainly transcend the world."¹¹⁸

There is, of course, the faintest of possibilities that the story describes a real change of heart on Dong's part; we will never know for sure. But it looks as if some clever story-makers managed not only to turn the narrative tables on a famous scholar-courtier who was on record as having argued against the possibility of *xian*-hood, but also to get their story taken up into Ge Hong's *Traditions*, thus winning for it the patronage and textual sponsorship, as it were, of a highly successful and long-transmitted compilation that we know to have been copied and

117. See *TL*, 224.

118. *Ibid.*, 224–225.

chanted throughout the Tang and into the Song, not to mention the fact that we are still reading and discussing it today. The shapers of this counter-narrative of Dong Zhongshu surely never imagined it would be so successful.

I know of no hagiographic co-optation, however, bolder than that of Kong Anguo 孔安國.¹¹⁹ Han and early medieval readers would have recognized this name as that of a direct descendant of Confucius who, during the reign of Han Emperor Wu (note again this association), held various court and regional appointments and allegedly discovered an “old text” version of chapters of the *Book of Documents* embedded in the walls of his illustrious ancestor’s family home.¹²⁰ His family pedigree as well as his association with “old text” ideology put him at the farthest possible remove from both the quest for transcendence and the cluster of cosmological and physiological assumptions that made it thinkable. Yet there he is, in passages attributed to Ge Hong’s *Traditions*, the hero of a hagiography crediting him with transcendence:

Kong Anguo was a native of Lu.¹²¹ He habitually circulated *qi* and ingested lead and cinnabar.¹²² He reached 300 years of age and had the appearance of a boy. He secluded himself in Mount Qian,¹²³ [but] he had hundreds of disciples as followers. Each time he abstained from grains and entered his chamber, he would reemerge after a year and a half even younger-looking than before. During the times when he was not within his chamber, he ate and drank normally and was in this respect no different than ordinary people.

As a person, Anguo was very serious. He guarded the essentials of his Way with unusual care and was unwilling to transmit them lightly. He examined for five or six years the character of those who served him and only then made a transmission to them. There was a certain Chen Bo 陳伯, a native of Anle,¹²⁴ who sought to serve him. Anguo took him on as a disciple, and he stayed for three years. Anguo then knew Bo was trustworthy, so he told him: “When I was young, I worked even harder in search of arts of the Dao, and there was no place I did not go. But I was unable to obtain a divine elixir or any method for ascending to heaven by means of the eight minerals; I only received methods

119. Almost as bold is the transformation of the Warring States figure of Mozi into a transcendent; see *ibid.*, 329–330.

120. See Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han & Xin Periods*, 206–207; on the “old/new texts” controversy, see Nylan, “The *Chin wen/Ku wen* Controversy in Han Times.”

121. An area in what is now southern Shandong Province, and the ancient home of Confucius, as any contemporary reader would have known.

122. Or “an elixir made from lead.”

123. In modern Qianshan district, Anhui Province.

124. That is, of Anle district, situated in modern Shunyi district, Hebei Province.

for attaining earthbound transcendence that would allow one to postpone one's death. But then I began to serve a fisherman by the sea. This fisherman was the minister of the ancient kingdom of Yue, Fan Li 范蠡,¹²⁵ who had changed his names and remained in reclusion to escape perilous times. He took pity on me for my determination and transmitted to me secret macrobiotic methods by which one is able to transcend the world. It was by them that Da Wu, Si Cheng, Zi Qi, Jiang Bo, and Tu Shan¹²⁶ managed to revert to youthful appearance after reaching 1,000 years in age. Since the time when I received this Way, I have been ingesting its drugs for over 300 years. I transmitted just one of the methods to Cui Zhongqing 崔仲卿¹²⁷ when he was 84 years old, and he has been taking the product for 33 years now. If you examine his skin and build, you will see that his breath and strength are extremely healthy, his hair has not gone white, his teeth are all intact and firm. You should go and serve him." So Chen Bo did so. He received his methods, and he, too, transcended the world and did not grow old.

There was also the wife of a certain Zhang He 張合. At the age of 50, she ingested [the elixir] and reverted to the appearance of someone in her early twenties. The whole district wondered at this. At the age of 86, she gave birth to a son.

Anguo also taught several other people; they all lived 400 years. Afterward he entered the mountains and departed.¹²⁸

Thus reads one of the most bizarre hagiographies attributed to *Traditions*. It is bizarre not for the sort of story it tells, which is utterly typical, but because of its subject. I am aware of no subsequent counter-narratives, but it is certain that some readers would have been shocked, others bemused, others simply amused at what is asserted here: Confucius' direct descendant numbered among *xian* of old! As if anticipating this reaction, the text furnishes certain details that might serve to explain why Kong Anguo had such an utterly different reputation in the more mainstream historical

125. The minister Fan Li is attested in several ancient texts, receives a hagiography in *Traditions of Exemplary Transcendents*, the content of which is partially reflected in our text (Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan*, 102–104), and figures in a few early medieval accounts of anomalies (see *SW*, 198). An ancient text of uncertain date and seemingly alchemical content, the *Fan zi Jiran*, was ascribed to him; fragments survive, one of them (cited in *TPYL* 812:7a) describing the transformation of black lead filings into "yellow cinnabar" and its successive transformation into "watery powder."

126. The text is here difficult to interpret. These figures, about whom nothing is known, may have been legendary Zhou officials, thus contemporaries of Fan Li.

127. Of whom nothing further is known, except that Ge Hong mentions in passing having seen books by a man apparently named Cui Zhong (*NP* 15.272), who may be the same person.

128. *TL*, 311–312, omitting the last line, which is obviously a much later addition to the text.

accounts. His extreme secrecy, his utmost caution in transmitting secret methods only to choice disciples, and the statement that “during the times when he was not within his chamber, he ate and drank normally and was in this respect no different from ordinary people” all conspire to offer the puzzled or skeptical reader an implied theory of why Kong has heretofore been known only as a Han official and old-text-discoverer: he kept his secrets very well indeed, leading a double—and very long—life.

This extraordinary co-optation may not have originated with Ge Hong; I suspect he was here, as in many other cases, drawing on already current traditions. In his *Inner Chapters*, Ge cites a work titled simply *Esoterica* (*Miji* 秘記) that is attributed to Kong Anguo. The cited passage concerns Zhang Liang 張良 (d. 187 B.C.E.), a figure known in the histories and other texts as an advocate of Laozian values at the early Han court. It maintains that Zhang was in fact a student of the ancient Sire Yellowstone (Huangshi gong 黃石公) and his teachers the Four Elders (Sihao 四皓¹²⁹)—all of whom are here credited with having been transcendents themselves. Zhang had, thanks to methods received from them, achieved transcendence despite popular opinion that he died.¹³⁰

The implicit if unsubtle agenda, both of the hagiography and of the attribution of the *Esoterica* story to Kong Anguo, is to win legitimacy in readers’ eyes for the transcendence quest. Even Kong, the argument runs, a direct descendant of Confucius himself (a descent line with maximal cultural capital attached to it), wrote about matters of esoteric practice and attained *xian*-hood. If he did this, yet did it in secret so that historians and court chroniclers had no knowledge of it, perhaps many others around you are doing so as well. And if many others, past and present—even Confucius’ descendants—were in quest of transcendence and seeking out its arts and texts, perhaps the reader should do so as well.

There were practitioners, and there were accounts of practitioners. Whether or not the practitioners attained their goals of bodily deathlessness and celestial appointment (or, it may be, ongoing life here on earth), some of them, at least,

129. On them, see *ibid.*, 307 n.67.

130. *NP* 5:113. An old man who associates himself with the “yellow stone” at Mount Jicheng, and who bestows an esoteric military manual on Zhang Liang, appears in *Han shu* 40.2024. Sire Yellowstone receives a biography in Huangfu Mi’s *Traditions of Eminent Masters* (*Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳 2:12a–13a), and military manuals (perhaps including methods for summoning spirit-troops) were attributed to him (see *Sui shu*, “Jingji zhi,” 1013, for several titles). Two versions of a “silk text” attributed to him also are preserved in the Daoist canon (*DZ* 1178, 1179); both have Song commentaries and consist of mostly moral and political instruction for rulers, and the preface to the latter version says the text was found during the Jin disorder in Zhang Liang’s tomb. The entry on *DZ* 1179 in Schipper and Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon*, 64–65, holds open the possibility that this text really does derive from Zhang Liang of the Han.

attained the sort of immortality bestowed by collective memory, in that we still read and discuss their stories today. These stories were shaped and transmitted by many parties with many concerns. Adepts themselves had a role in such narration, as we saw in Chapter 5, but the story-making by no means stopped there. It was a continuous process of contestation. Many sorts of persuasive work were done by many parties through the vehicle of *xian* stories, some more successfully than others. A family might in effect nominate a practitioner it sponsored for inclusion in translocal arrays of *xian*, hoping thus to enhance its own prestige; the nomination might or might not be ratified by collectors of *xian* accounts. Figures on record as having died could be brought back to life in narrative. Individuals who had argued against the possibility of transcendence could be turned into its advocates. From the obscure but productive mills of collective memory and its narrations, even a descendant of Confucius—revered font of a tradition inimical to almost every aspect of the quest for transcendence—could emerge as a successful *xian*. Of this making of stories, counter-stories, and counter-counter-stories there was, and is, no end.