

## **Transcendence and Immortality**

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One of the most difficult issues in the study of Taoism is how to understand the final goal of the Taoist life. The difficulty owes not merely to insufficient research, or even to the murkiness and disparity of the data, but also to the interpretive lenses through which specialists and non-specialists alike have viewed the issue. For generations, many writers maintained, for instance, that what ultimately distinguished the "philosophical Taoists" of antiquity from the "religious Taoists" of imperial times was that the latter were devoted to achieving a "physical immortality." That artificial distinction invited overemphasis on certain elements of Taoism, where practitioners at least discussed the use of material substances and processes (e.g., "elixirs") as supposed means of achieving the spiritual goal. Such elements were indeed present in Taoism, but their importance has often been exaggerated because of their amazing alienity from the modern Enlightenment mentality and from models of religious life known from other traditions. We must be careful not to mistake the part for the whole, and must carefully consider a wide array of Taoist phenomena, and numerous divergent models, within the minds and lives of Taoists of different periods and different traditions. We must also distinguish the religious models of practicing Taoists from the highly romanticized conceptions of "immortals" that always abounded in Chinese literature, art, and culture. The ultimate distinction is that among Taoists, the goal was never simply to find a means of obviating the death-event, but rather to attain an exalted state of existence through assimilation to higher realities. Among Taoists, such attainment generally assumed a process of personal purification and enhanced awareness of reality, i.e., a process of moral, spiritual, and cognitive growth (Kirkland, 1992). Once one has completed such a process, one is assumed to have somehow reached a state that will not be extinguished when the physical body dies. Beyond these generalities, concepts varied widely,

not only between the classical Taoist texts and later "religious" practitioners, but among Taoists of every segment of the tradition.

A common problem involves the term *xian*, commonly mistranslated as "immortal." Both in China and beyond, this term has widely been regarded as a key feature of "Taoism" as it developed in imperial times. In the early and mid-20th century, leading scholars (e.g., Henri Maspero and H. G. Creel) argued over whether the ancient writers of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* envisioned such attainment of a deathless state. Some argued that the classical Taoists only sought a more spiritualized life and an unworried acceptance of inevitable death. The 4th-century-CE text *Liezi*, which borrowed much from the *Zhuangzi*, seems to insist upon the finality of death, with no indication that one can transcend it. Certainly, many passages of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* suggest that one's goal should be to live a spiritualized life until death occurs, but others (e.g., *Laozi* 50) clearly commend learning how to prevent death. The term *xian* occurs in neither the *Laozi* nor the *Neiye*, and in *Zhuangzi* it does not appear among his many terms for the idealized person (*zhenren*, etc.). But in *Zhuangzi* 12, a wise border guard tells Yao that the "sage" (*shengren*) "after a thousand years departs and ascends as a *xian*," and in *Zhuangzi* 1 a character is ridiculed for doubting the reality of the invulnerable "spiritual person" (*shenren*) of Mt. Gushe, who ascends on dragons and extends protection and blessings to people. These passages are quite consistent with most later images of the *xian*, and suggest that such a state is both theoretically possible and a worthy goal.

Writings of Han times (Kaltenmark 1953) mention *xian* as denizens of distant realms, often winged beings who can fly between earth and higher worlds. Sima Qian (*Shihji* 28.1368-69), mentions men of Yan who "practiced the Way of expansive Transcendence (*fangxian tao*): they shed their mortal forms and melted away, relying upon matters involving spiritual beings (*gueishen*)." Though such images are quite vague, they provided fuel for centuries of religious and literary elaboration, both Taoist and non-Taoist. For instance, in literature from Han to Tang times, the goddess Xiwangmu "controlled access to immortality," but while poets wove bittersweet images of "immortality" as an unattainable beatitude (Cahill 1993), Taoist writers firmly believed that one can transcend "the human condition" if one can only learn the subtle secrets and practice them diligently enough.

The most famous of all such writers was Ge Hong (283-343), whose incoherent ramblings on "inner studies" and alchemy were long falsely imagined to constitute the core of "religious Taoism." Ge, actually a maverick Confucian, attempted to convince "gentlemen" that the pursuit of deathlessness through alchemy was a feasible and honorable goal (Barrett 1987). Such beliefs did reappear among some leading Shangqing practitioners, such as Tao Hongjing, but were subordinated to a pursuit of spiritual elevation that was assumed to require the loss of bodily life (Strickmann 1979). Some depictions of the process of *shijie* ("liberation by means of a corpse") intimate that exceptional men and women could undergo a transformation that merely simulated death (Robinet, 1979). But we must read carefully to distinguish metaphors from practical ideals (Bokenkamp, 1989). Though many accounts depict leading practitioners as having "ascended to immortality," most Taoist texts actually suggest a "post-mortem immortality" (Seidel, 1987).

Stories of "immortals" who continue to live for hundreds of years are generally products of literary imagination, not Taoist religious practice (Kirkland 1992). Yet, Taoism was the only Chinese tradition that provided colorful images of a happy personal afterlife. And it is clear that while some Taoists used such images as recruitment devices, luring novices into a process of spiritual self-cultivation, others did occasionally ponder the theoretical possibilities of attaining an idealized state beyond death. For instance, the famed Tang poet/*daoshi* Wu Yun (d. 778) is credited with a text "On Attaining Spiritual Transcendence through Study" (*Shenxian kexue lun* (in *Zongxuan xiansheng wenji*, HY 1045: TT 726-27). And even the "Fifteen Articles" of the Quanzhen founder, Wang Zhe (Wang Chongyang, 1113-1170), says that the successful reclusive meditator attains the status of *xian* while still alive in the mortal body (*Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun*, HY 1223: TT 989, article 12). Such ambivalent concepts of transcendence endure among 20th-century Taoists, for human minds vary in how they conceive spiritual goals.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:** Seidel 1987: 223-37; Bokenkamp 1989: 1-20; Kirkland 1992: 201-14; Strickmann 1979: 123-92.

**SEE ALSO:** *shijie*, *zhexian*, *shenren*, *shengren*, *zhenren*

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