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Immortals and Alchemists

Spirit-Writing and Self-Cultivation in Ming Daoism

ILIA MOZIAS

Abstract¹

What role do immortals play in the life and practice of a community of alchemists? In this paper, I examine the role of immortals in the cultivation practice of a small alchemical community formed around the famous Ming alchemist Lu Xixing. Lu and his companions had no connection to any religious institution, and instead of looking for a human master, they turned to the practice of spirit-writing. In séances, they met numerous immortals and discussed with them various aspects of self-cultivation and personal life. Lu collected detailed records of these conversations in his key treatise, which documents how immortals became members of their community and transformed alchemical cultivation into a journey in the twilight zone between the human and immortal worlds. They accompanied Lu and his companions on all stages of alchemical cultivation and helped them enter a state of mind necessary for achieving enlightenment. Participation in spirit-writing séances allowed the Daoists to practice internal alchemy without leaving their habitual literati life.

Do rituals play any role in internal alchemy (*neidan* 内丹)? Do immortals and gods participate in alchemists' cultivation? Do alchemists need their help and advice? Alchemical scriptures seem to give negative answers to

¹ This paper is a revised version of a part of my forthcoming dissertation on Lu Xixing. I presented it at the 11th International Conference on Daoist Studies in May 17-22, 2017 in Paris.

all these questions. The language of alchemical scriptures is very technical and symbolical, gods and rituals are rarely mentioned, and visualizations of gods are usually absent. To achieve immortality, alchemists manipulate their own essence (*jing* 精), vital energy (*qi* 氣), and spirit (*shen* 神) without any involvement of the divine. Many modern alchemists such as Chen Yingning 陳櫻寧 (1880-1969) even claimed that internal alchemy was devoid of superstitions and could be easily reconciled with modernity (see Liu 2009).

Still, some rituals played an important role in its history, notably spirit-writing (*fujī* 扶乩/箕, *fuluan* 扶鸞). During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), many alchemical communities used spirit-writing techniques to communicate with the gods, to receive transmission of alchemical secrets, and to create new alchemical scriptures (see Lai 2013; 2015).

One such community was formed around the famous alchemist Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520-1601 / 1606). Members were ordinary literati who had no formal connection to any religious institution. Unable to find a true master in this world, they looked for help among the immortals and, in spirit-writing séances, channelled numerous divine entities to discuss various questions related to alchemical cultivation and their personal life. Having no obligations to any institution, these alchemists could practice in a way suitable to their educational and social background. For them, internal alchemy was an intellectual quest of men of letters, in which meetings with divine guests played a crucial role.

The Author

Lu was born and lived most of his life in Xinghua 興化 county near Yangzhou 揚州 (modern Jiangsu). According to his biography in the *Chongxiu xinghua xianzhi* 重修興化縣志 (Revised Edition of the Gazetteer of Xinghua County), he tried to pass the civic examination nine times but failed. Giving up on that, he turned to Daoism and spent his life writing and pursuing immortality.²

² Published in *Zhongguo difang zhi jicheng* 中國地方志集成 (Chinese Local Gazetteer Compendium), 48:243.2a-b. (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991).

Lu was a prolific writer whose interests were not limited to internal alchemy, producing many works during the short period from 1564 to 1573. In 1564, Lu wrote his first alchemical treatise, the *Jindan jiuzheng pian* 金丹就正篇 (Chapters on Seeking the Correct Understanding of the Golden Elixir, ZWDS 5, 368-71).³ In 1573, he finished his last work on the subject, the *Zhouyi cantong qi kouyi* 周易參同契口義 (Oral Presentation of the Seal of the Unity of the Three, ZWDS 5, 287-317). The first edition of the collection of his alchemical writings, the *Fanghu waishi* 方壺外史 (External Secretary of Mount Fanghu) came out around 1572. A second edition soon followed, published after 1580.

In 1576-78, Lu wrote a commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, entitled *Nanhua zhenjing fumo* 南華真經副墨 (Ancillary Writings on the Scripture of Southern Florescence, ZWDS 2, 3-299). Toward the end of his life, he also composed commentaries on the *Śūramgama-sūtra* (*Lengyan jing* 楞嚴經) and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Lengjia jing* 楞伽經句), and participated in editing a local gazetteer.⁴

Lu Xixing is usually considered the founder of the so-called Eastern School (*Dongpai* 東派) of internal alchemy. However, no sources prior to the 19th century mention such a school, and the name first appears in the writings of Li Xiyue 李西月 (1806–1856), the founder of the Western School (*Xipai* 西派) (Yang 1995, 38-41). Nothing close to Lu indicates that he was ever ordained or became a member of any religious institution or lineage.⁵ He apparently had no teacher or disciples, and had few if any close Daoist and Buddhist friends.

³ Lu's works appear in the *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書 (Daoist Texts Outside the Canon; abbr. ZWDS) (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1992-94). For a new edition of his writings, see Lu 2010.

⁴ He usually gives exact dates in the prefaces, allowing a reconstruction of his biography and a creation of a writing timeline. See Lu 2010, 670-72, 680-87.

⁵ Liu Ts'un-yan (1976) claims that Lu was a Daoist "priest" and, probably, a member of the Complete Perfection School (*Quanzhen dao* 全真道). Liu, however, bases this conclusion not on the analysis of original sources, but rather on the assumption that a master of Daoist self-cultivation must also be a member of a Daoist institution. In fact, Lu's case shows that this assumption is incorrect. Lu was indeed a famous alchemist, but all available primary sources indicate that he

Rather, it seems that the majority of his friends were local literati, some of them quite famous. They include the renowned poet Zong Chen 宗臣 (1525-1560) and the Grand Secretary of the Imperial Cabinet (*Neige shoufu* 內閣首輔) Li Chunfang 李春芳 (1510-1584). Lu was particularly close to Zhao Shi 趙栻 (n.d.) and Yao Gengsheng 姚更生 (n.d.), who became his companions in alchemical cultivation and spirit-writing.

Rather than standing out as the founder of an alchemical school, Lu therefore was just an ordinary man of letters interested in internal alchemy who happened to be also a successful writer of alchemical books.

The Transmission

How is it possible to practice internal alchemy and write alchemical treatises without receiving a formal transmission from a true master? Although Lu never worked with a human master, he claimed to have received a direct transmission from a divine perfected, none less than the legendary immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓. The preface to the *Jindan jiuzheng pian* describes his development. It says,

The thousands of volumes of alchemical scriptures I have read all say that the great drug of longevity should grows from the Former Heaven *qi* of genuine oneness.⁶ Being asked where this *qi* comes from, alchemical scriptures assuredly point to the “other place.”⁷ If we search for it, could it be that our body does not have this *qi*, so we should look for it in an “other place?” There are few who believe in this and many who doubt this.

From my early years, I aspired to practice this way, but because my abilities are dull and my nature is obtuse, I was not able to understand its

had no formal connection to any religious institution. I discuss Lu's life in more details in the forthcoming dissertation (Mozias, in progress).

⁶The Former Heaven *qi* of genuine oneness (*xiantian zhenyi zhi qi* 先天真乙之氣) is the primordial *qi*, which existed before the creation of the universe. An alchemist is supposed to imbibe it and, using it as a main component, to form a drug of immortality.

⁷“Other place” (*bichu* 彼處) is an ambiguous term. Chen Yingning discusses it in the introduction to Li Xiyue's, *Daoqiao tan* 道竅談 (*Talks on the Essence of the Way*) (ZWDS 26, 607.2a-608.2b). He sees three meanings: *qi* stored in the kidneys; a void outside the body; and people of the opposite sex, i.e. sexual partners.

essence thoroughly. I sometimes took the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three) and the *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Chapters on the Awakening to Perfection) for my readings. But I found that thorns and brambles on the path were hard to eliminate, and I was going backwards rather than moving forward.

Then I discovered the commentaries of Yu Yan 俞琰, from which I first learned about the way of purity and nonaction.⁸ Whenever he spoke about the cultivation of *qi* external to the body, he condemned all these practices as heterodox. He considered that metal, tripod, fire, and tally are just the fire of the furnace. Yu Yan was firmly entrenched in his predispositions, which were steadfast and could not be shaken. Alas! If it means indeed only purity, then what do the worst students laugh about and why does slander arise so easily? [*Laozi* 41]

Lu here describes the transmission of alchemical knowledge as a tedious intellectual pursuit of a man of letters who struggles to understand the essence of internal alchemy. In his studies, Lu first turns to books. He reads numerous alchemical scriptures, but soon confronts a problem: he is unable to understand the meaning of the concept of an "other place" that alchemical scriptures claim to be the origin of the main ingredient of the drug of immortality, the Former Heaven *qi* of genuine oneness. Lu continues his attempts to find an answer in books, but without success. Continuing his quest, he eventually has the critical encounter:

At that point in my reading of alchemical books, I was unable to avoid doubts. Then, in the *dingwei* year of Jiajing era (1547), it was my destiny to have a fortuitous meeting with Patriarch Lü in the thatched hut in Beihai. Patriarch Lü stayed with me and our relationship was cordial and harmonious. He granted me the wine of the mystery and consoled me with sweet words. It was a rare encounter, unparalleled in past, present, and future lives, and not likely to repeat even in thousand years.

Patriarch Lü encouraged me to diligently practice the superior Dao. First, he explained how to combine yin and yang and pursue cultivation of the Dao. At that time, I mistakenly mentioned the teachings of the three

⁸ Yu Yan (1258-1314) was a scholar and alchemist, mostly known for his commentary on the *Zhouyi cantong qi*, called *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* 周易參同契發揮 (Elaborations on the Seal of the Unity of the Three, DZ 1005) (Pregadio in Pregadio 2008, 1190-91).

peaks and asked the Master about it.⁹ The Master dismissed them but transmitted the *Jietai zhi ge* 結胎之歌 (Song on Coagulating a Fetus) and the instructions on “entering the chamber.”

The Master’s words and doctrines, which filled up the books and volumes, were subtle and profound. I recorded and preserved them. But although the words contain the essentials of the superior Dao, they cannot express it completely, and over the next twenty years, I almost completely failed to live up to the Master’s expectations.

Not only Lu does not meet a human master, he even does not try to look for one. Fortunately, he has a meeting with a legendary immortal Lü Dongbin who explains the right way of self-cultivation and presents him with new books that contain profound and subtle knowledge. As Lu puts it, it was “a rare encounter, unparalleled in the past, present and future lives, which is hard to present itself even in thousand years.” A rare encounter it probably was, but, evidently, not as rare as a meeting with a human master whom Lu has never met. Such man of letters as Lu Xixing seems to have more chances to encounter an immortal than to meet a human master. However, he does not reach a thorough understanding of internal alchemy immediately after the meeting with the Master. He continues to doubt and hesitate for twenty years. Then things change:

In the *jiaping* (the 12th lunar month) month of the *jiazi* year (1564), I escaped to the wilderness. Looking at myself in a mirror, I saw my sorrowful life and the grayish hair on the temples. I sighed deeply, as no meritorious achievements have been achieved yet, and I knew that I was running out of time. I again received a response from Patriarch Lü, who appeared to me in a dream. I discarded the one and became concerned with the other [*Laozi* 12] and, thereupon, achieved great realization.

Within a few years, my practice was complete. I looked into my memory for the Master’s transmission and was able to recall almost all of it. I examined treatises, doctrines, scriptures and songs and repeatedly clarified their meaning. One day, in a state of transition between being awake and sleeping, my mind became clear and unimpeded, I felt as if I achieved

⁹ Three peaks (*sanfeng* 三峰) refers to sexual cultivation practices fully called “gathering and battling at the three peaks” (*sanfeng caizhan* 三峰採戰). In alchemical literature, this term usually has a derogatory meaning (Hudson 2008, 411-16).

enlightenment and I wrote this essay. Confucius said, "Be thoroughly versed in the old and understand the new."¹⁰

Today, I am versed in the old and understand the new. Although my words are but manifestation of a sudden conjecture, and I do not dare to use them to correct those who realized the Dao, they nevertheless do not contradict the meaning of my Master's teachings. (ZWDS 5, 368.2a-2b)

Once Lu meets the Master for a second time, he has a painful moment of self-reflection, achieves great realization, recalls all the teachings, and enters "a state of transition between being awake and sleeping." Only then he achieves enlightenment and comes to write his alchemical treatise.

Here he equates the transmission of alchemical knowledge to practical cultivation. It is not a one-time event but rather a lifetime journey, which begins with reflecting on the meaning of the alchemical scriptures and ends when he writes his own treatise. Such is the way of self-cultivation of a man of letters.

The Master plays an important role in this journey. He appears when Lu is unable to resolve his doubts, becomes a participant in Lu's internal conversation over the meaning of alchemical scriptures, discusses with him critical aspects of alchemical cultivation, and suggest right answers to Lu's questions. The Master helps Lu to enter into a state of mind necessary for achieving enlightenment and adds a transcendental facet to an intellectual journey of a man of letters in the world of internal alchemy.

Spirit-Writing

The meetings Lu had with the Master were not accidental, but took place during spirit-writing séances, both widespread in late imperial China as well as still popular today, especially in Taiwan.¹¹

¹⁰ *Lunyu* 2, 11. "The Master said, be thoroughly versed in the old and understand the new – then you can be a teacher" (Watson 2007, 21).

¹¹ Studies on spirit-writing include Chao 1942; Clart 1997; 2003; Goossaert 2014; 2015; Jordan and Overmyer 2014; Kleeman 1994; Lang and Ragvald 1998; Xu 1999.

During a *séance*, one person goes into trance and holds a sieve or a stick, then traces images on a surface covered with sand or ashes. Another person records and interprets these images as characters. They might use a stick or a brush, producing the images on paper. Sometimes, instead of being held by a person, the sieve hangs from a rope. Followers see records obtained in this manner as messages from the gods; the mediums' names are usually not recorded.

Centered around the medium and the spirit-writing ritual often communities of followers develop. Members watch the delivery of the messages, ask questions, and discuss a wide range of problems with the gods, ranging from obscure doctrinal questions through the details of everyday life to personal issues. They may sometimes use other divination methods, such as trances, dreams, and spirit possession. Regardless of the divination method, the purpose is to receive and record divine revelations.

Members typically meet for some time, record the content of their communications with gods, choose the most valuable records, and edit and compile them into a book, which is often published. The practice appears in the historical records in the 10th century, notably associated with the cult of Purple Lady (Zigu 紫姑) (Boltz 2009). Practiced first by ordinary, often illiterate or semi-literate commoners, it gradually became a literati pastime, involving numerous different immortals, gods, historical personages, and deceased poets who all came to discuss politics, examination issues, or career prospects. The attitude of the literati to the practice was often half-serious: without denying the possibility of communicating with the divine, they still felt free to reject or even ridicule a god's advice if it did not correlate with their own understanding and worldview (Xu 1999).

In the late 12th century, several communities of devotees used spirit-writing to produce scriptures associated with the god Wenchang 文昌 (Kleeman 1994; Goossaert 2014; 2015, 84). From this time on, many Daoists communities incorporated it into their ritual, even though authorities often regarded it with suspicion (Lai 2015, 115). During the late Ming and Qing, it spread more widely, finding popularity among Daoists, adherents of heterodox movements, local elites, officials, and also commoners. Spirit-writing groups most commonly channeled Wenchang, Lü

Dongbin, Guandi 關帝, Doumu 斗母, and Zhenwu 真武. During the Qing, their scriptures were collected, edited and codified (Goossaert 2015).

Spirit-writing also became an important source of revelation of new alchemical scriptures, often centering around Lü Dongbin.¹² The most famous and best studied among them is the *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* 太一金華宗旨 (Instructions on the Golden Florescence of Great Unity) (Mori 2002; Cott 2011). Translated by Richard Wilhelm and with a commentary by Carl Jung under the title *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, it became one of the first alchemical scriptures known in the West (Wilhelm 1984; see also Cleary 1992). Numerous other works are collected in the *Lüzu quanshu* 呂祖全書 (Complete Collection of the Works of Patriarch Lü), going back to the late Ming and republished variously in the 18th and 19th centuries with ever new treatises (Lai 2013).

Besides scripture revelation spirit-writing as ritual also became the foundation of a new Daoist movement. Lai Chi-Tim argues that during the late Ming a new lay Daoist movement emerged "that shared a belief in Patriarch Lü combined with spirit-writing, independence from monastic institutions, and the engagement of lay communities in the cult within certain congregational contexts in association with traditional lineages" (2015, 119). The combination of spirit-writing with internal alchemy is an important characteristic of this movement. Lai further claims that this movement first emerged in the late Ming in Jiangnan, where Lu lived at the time (2015, 118). An analysis of the spirit-writing activities of Lu's community illuminates the practice of this group in its early stages.

The Record

Lu participated in spirit-writing séances over twenty-six years, from 1547 until 1572. He kept detailed records and collected them in his *Sanzang zhenquan* 三藏真詮 (Truthful Explanation of the Three Depositories), only a portion of which is still extant. An abridged version of the extant parts of the text was first published in 1936 by Chen Yingning in the journal on internal alchemy *Yang shan banyue kan* 揚善半月刊 (Biweekly Journal for Promulgation of Goodness) (Yang 1995, 44). Full versions of the extant

¹² On the spirit-writing tradition connected to Lü Dongbin, see Goossaert 2015; Lai 2013; 2015; Mori 2002; Valussi 2015.

portion appear in the *Daozang jinghua* 道藏精華 (Essentials Splendors of Daoist Canon; abbr. JH), edited by Xiao Tianshi 蕭天石 (1908-1986),¹³ as well as in the *Daoshu jicheng* 道書集成 (Collection of Daoist Books; abbr. JC).¹⁴ A revised and edited version is, moreover, available in the new collection of Lu's writings (Lu 2010). Parallels with other works of Lu arguably prove its authenticity (Yang 1995, 44-54).

In the preface, Lu describes his meeting with Lü Dongbin and how the treatise came about.

My knowledge is meager and my nature is inferior. I was deaf to the Dao. Yet starting from the autumn of the *dingwei* year [1547], when it was my destiny to have a fortuitous meeting with Patriarch Lü, we together with Sir Yao Siming (Yao Gengsheng) got a chance to receive the Master's regardful and earnest instructions. We were meeting with the Master for many years, and in great details recorded these events and the essentials of the Master's teaching. Over the years, so many records have been collected that pages were dropping out of the book's slipcases.

Here the description of the meetings with the Master differs from that in the preface to the *Jindan jiuzheng pian*. Lu claims that he met the Master not once or twice but rather numerous times. He also met him not alone but together with his friend Yao Gengsheng 姚更生 (courtesy name Siming 四溟).¹⁵ At some point, another Lu's friend, Zhao Shi 趙栻 (courtesy name Ziyang 子嚴), joined the community:¹⁶

¹³ See *Daozang jinghua* 道藏精華 (Essential Blossoms of the Daoist Canon), vol.54. (Taipei: Ziyou chubanshe. 1987).

¹⁴ See *Daoshu jicheng* 道書集成 (Collection of Daoist Books), vol.44. (Beijing: Jiuzhou tushu. 1999).

¹⁵ We have only a limited knowledge about Yao Gengsheng. He, just like Lu, belonged to the circle of local literati. In 1579, Yao successfully passed the provincial examinations and received the degree of *juren* 舉人. In 1592 he was appointed a head magistrate of Xiangcheng county 襄城縣 (in modern Henan province) (Lu 2010; 684, 686).

¹⁶ We know very little about Zhao Shi. He was apparently a member of a rich and influential local lineage. His cousin Zhao Song (趙宋 n.d.), also a close friend of Lu, was a publisher of Lu's alchemical writings.

Later Sirs Zhao Zaoyang (Zhao Shi) and Yao met the Master again. Together we served as attendants at the Master's gate (studied with the Master as his disciples). Months and years went by; every one of us recorded what has been transmitted to him by the Master. One day, we gathered together and looked at the records. Even though the order of our records was different from each other, their core was the same and the essentials of the Master's teaching were not dissimilar. It was a rare encounter unparalleled in the past, present and future lives that indeed does not to present itself often.

The meetings between the three companions and the Master was a communal activity as they met him together as a group. At the same time, it was a personal undertaking of each of the three friends, as they made their own personal records. The compilation of the final treatise, however, was Lu's initiative. He writes:

I was afraid that, as times had been changing, the Master's teachings would fall into oblivion and would not be propagated. Therefore, I cherishingly gathered the records recorded by me and my two companions, collected them and combined them into a book. I divided it into three volumes. The first is called the *Fazang* 法藏 [Depository of Law], the second is the *Huazang* 華藏 [Depository of Ornaments], and the third is the *Lunzang* 論藏 [Depository of Doctrines]. The *Fazang* discusses the Dao, the *Huazang* discusses the language, and the *Lunzang* discusses the doctrines.

At the beginning, neither the Master intended to transmit a sacred book, nor Lu planned to create one. Only gradually, Lu realized the value of the records he and his friends made and, fearing that the Master's teachings might be lost, started to compile the treatise. Considering the records sacred, he preserved them in their original handwriting and even vowed to keep them secret. Lu writes:

Each of these contains records made in our own handwriting, which were stored in our houses. This book could be compared with the *Dashun* 大順 [Great Compliance] and the *Hetu* 河圖 [River Chart]. Those who guard it should know to keep it secret. The Master's order concerning the *Fazang* are especially strict: it should never be exposed! There is a vow to Heaven. This vow says, "It is better to sell the stolen goods than to expose the *Fazang*. Let Heaven be a witness; I vow to never forget this!" (JC 44, 472.2-473.1)

Presently, only a part of the treatise, the two chapters of the *Fazang*, is still extant, but we are, nevertheless, able to understand the text's main characteristics. In the treatise, Lu describes regular meetings between immortals and the small group of the three followers.¹⁷ The meetings occurred in various locales, including local Daoist and Buddhist monasteries, but they mostly took place at the private houses of the community members. In 1561, Lu bought a house on the east bank of the Huai River 淮河, which also became a venue for conducting spirit-writing séances.

The text contains few specific details on the rituals performed by the group members. Nevertheless, Lu repeatedly refers to an altar for ritual performances and sometimes mentions the community festivals and celebrations, such as the commemorations of immortals' birthdays, leaving no doubt that the group engaged in formal ritual.

Spirit-writing was probably not the only method of communication with immortals, used by the community members. Lu defines three ways for immortals to descend to the human world. He writes:

The Perfected descend [to the human world] in three different ways: in form, in spirit and in *qi*. Using a sieve 箕, they descend in spirit; entering an aperture, they descend in *qi*; if they are visible, they descend in form. (JC 44, 408.2)

That is to say, immortals can descend in their spirit, in their *qi*, or in their bodily form. Spirit-writing is a method of communication with the spirits of immortals. "Entering an aperture" is a technique that allows immortals to descend in their *qi*, and probably refers to some kind of spirit-possession. The community members might have used spirit-possession as well as other similar techniques, but Lu never explicitly acknowledges or describes it. It is even less clear how humans can meet immortals in their bodily form, but the treatise indeed contains many records of face-to-face meetings with immortals who behave like ordi-

¹⁷ Probably, other persons sometimes participated in the séances. Thus, Lu several times mentions certain Mr. Gu 顧子 (JC 44,477.2). However, the community definitely included only three permanent members, as Lu records only their conversations with immortals.

nary humans and seem to have physical bodies. Lu, however, provides no information on relevant rituals.

Nevertheless, spirit-writing was undoubtedly the core ritual of the group. Often, Lu explicitly refers to spirit-writing technique. For example, the famous physician Hua Tuo 華佗 (140-208) sometimes descended to teach Lu medical issues and to help him and his family members with health problems. One day, Hua sent the following message:

Immortal master Hua Qingnang (Hua Tuo) sent a message via a sieve, "I was thinking about something else, how is your health?" (JC 44, 491.2)

Besides spirit-writing, no other ritual or divination technique is explicitly mentioned in the text.

The main purpose of the ritual activity of the group was similar to that of all other spirit-writing communities: to meet the divine and to record divine revelations. In the treatise, Lu meticulously records conversations between the three companions and their divine guests. He usually writes down the date of a conversation, the name of a person who asked a question, the name of an immortal or god who replied to it, and the content of the reply.¹⁸ He earnestly records numerous, often quite trivial details of encounters with immortals, making his description very vivid and realistic. The compilation of the records is organized in a chronological order.

The *Sanzang zhenquan* is a remarkable treatise. Lu does not create either a Daoist scripture or a book of moral instructions, or a manual on alchemical cultivation. The treatise rather resembles a collection of anthropological field notes. Unlike a modern anthropologist, however, Lu studies not the human society, but the world of immortals.

Spirit-writing séances are intertwined with Lu's career as a writer of alchemical books. Conversations with divine guests culminated in writing and publication of Lu's own alchemical works. The *Sanzang zhenquan*

¹⁸ Lu makes no clear distinction between immortals (*xian* 仙) and gods (*shen* 神). The majority of his divine guests are referred as immortals. He uses the term "god" in some specific cases, referring, for example, to such well-known low-level deities as the House God (*zhaishen* 宅神). In this paper, I call all his divine guests "immortals," making exceptions only when Lu uses other designations.

has a record of the meeting with the Master in 1564, after which Lu achieved enlightenment and wrote his first alchemical work. Lu continued to write his alchemical works until 1573, while still encountering immortals in the séances of spirit-writings. We have no information that Lu and his friends engaged in spirit-writing activity after 1572. The year 1572 is also an approximate date of the publication of the first edition of the collection of his alchemical writings. His last alchemical treatise dates from 1573, and his commentary on the *Zhuangzi* from 1576-1578.

The Encounters

Besides Lü Dongbin, Lu and his friends channeled various ancient immortals, famous Daoists, gods of different ranks, Buddhist monks, historical figures, obscure deities, demons, and more. The pantheon kept changing, as new, previously unknown and often even unidentified deities descended to teach. Still, Lü Dongbin was a key figure among the immortals who communicated with Lu's group, coming more often than others that included Zhongli Quan 鐘離權, Liu Haichan 劉海蟾, and Lü's immortal assistants Suye 素野 and Yulu 玉爐.

These immortals soon came to form part of an extended alchemical community built around the three main human protagonists. Lu refers to Lü Dongbin as "master" (*shifu* 師傅), to Zhongli Quan as "grand master" (*taishi* 太師), and to Yulu and Suye as "senior disciples" (*shixiong* 师兄). The difference between the immortals and humans within this community is often blurred. Immortals frequently behave as if they are humans, engaging in ordinary conversations. For example,

On the 24th day, at *si* hour and one *ke* [about 9:15 am], we faced the Master at the Circumpolar Altar. The Master chanted, "There ought to be a meeting at the Yellow Crane Tower, an iron flute will be even more silent." He ordered us to sit down on the ground. He said that if he spoke too much, we would not be able to remember everything. Therefore, he described his teachings in a general manner. (JC 44, 497.2)

Divine guests were ubiquitous in the community's life, appearing at all sort of time and in various places. As the text records,

On the 28th day, in the evening, I just have finished making records; Patriarch Lü suddenly opened the door and entered. He sat down in my seat and ordered to call student Zhao, who was with Madam Shen. He calmly said that our will was not strong; therefore, our endeavors were unsuccessful. (JC 44, 500.2)

That is to say, Lü Dongbin enters the room suddenly, without any invitation or preliminary ritual activity: he can open the door and seems to have a physical body. He even knows the most intimate details of the personal lives of the members of the community: he knows that Zhao is with Madam Shen. He is, apparently, not happy about it, pointing out that the will of his disciples is weak and, therefore, their endeavors are unsuccessful.

Immortals take an active part in the personal life of Lu and his companions. They help Lu to heal his wife and children, assist Zhao with the organization of a funeral, and always express their concern for the community members' well-being. Relations between the humans and immortals may be quite emotional. When immortal Yulu is ordered not to descend anymore, he reacts to this order with genuine grief:

On the 26th day, in the morning we invited the grand master to descend, but senior disciple Yu suddenly descended and immediately bade us farewell. He said, "The Master's orders are very strict, I may not talk to you a lot." Then, he started to cry and departed, weeping in great grief. (JC 44, 518.1)

In addition to spirit-writing, the divine guests may descend through spirit-possession, in dreams, and even as real humans. Frequent visitations by the deities mean that the community members, albeit still living in the human world, are to a certain extent joining the world of immortals. Alchemical cultivation became a journey to the world of immortals.

Still, Lu and his friends are not full-fledged members of the world of immortals, but ordinary humans. They often do not know what immortal they are going to meet or are unable to recognize their divine visitors. Yao Gengsheng once had the following dream:

Sire Yao said, "Last night I also had a strange dream. I dreamed entering a grotto-residence. I saw more than eighty Perfected there. Among them, I

recognized only the Patriarch. Auspicious clouds were drifting in the sky, the music of immortals sounded majestic and sonorous. There were peaches as big as pumpkins, the Perfected peeled and eat them, and their happiness was boundless." (JC 44, 487.1)

In the dream, Yao meets more than eighty Perfected, but recognizes only one of them, Lü Dongbin. He describes the majestic gathering of Perfected, but makes no effort to interpret its meaning. The quotidian encounters with the divine guests notwithstanding, the community members have only a vague understanding of the world of immortals.

There always remains certain distance between the three companions and the divine guests that does not allow the latter to descend in their full form. Alchemical cultivation becomes an attempt to shorten this distance in order to meet the divine in its completeness. The form in which immortals descend depends on the community members' success in self-cultivation. Lu once asked Yulu why ordinary humans are unable to see the bodies of immortals:

I asked, "Do gods and immortals have bodies?" Senior Disciple Yu replied, "They do. However, gods and immortals who come here now are all coming in their spirits; their bodies are not coming." I replied, "If gods and immortals have bodies, why do they not let humans see it?" The senior disciple replied, "When you pass seven-tenth of your way of self-cultivation, you will naturally be able to see it. Today we meet through spirit-writing. Seeing is achieved gradually." (JC 44, 513.2)

The world of immortals gradually reveals itself to the community members. As the time goes by, Lu and his friends meet more and more divine guests and understand the world of immortals more and more deeply. At some point, they even take part in great gatherings of immortals, presided by the highest-ranking immortal in the *Sanzang zhenquan*, Grand Patriarch Meng 孟太祖 (Meng Taizu).¹⁹

¹⁹ Great Patriarch Meng is the highest-ranking immortal in the *Sanzang zhenquan*. Lu also refers to him as grand master Meng 孟太師 (Meng Taishi) and grand patriarch Meng 孟教主 (Meng Jiaozhu). Lu calls him a man of Zhou (zhouren 周人), so he was apparently born during the Zhou dynasty (周 1045 BC – 256 BC). He is probably the same immortal whom Lu once calls Immortal Meng He from

However, immortals never reveal themselves to the humans completely. When the world of immortals and the world of ordinary practitioners converge, immortals stop descending.

The Master said, "I have already completed the transmission of the Way. In tranquillity, you should contemplate about it. This hour, this day, this month, this year I part with you forever. From this time on, other immortals will also stop descending."

I asked, "Why is this so?"

The Master said, "It is not that the ways of the immortals and humans are separated. When the ways of immortals and humans are different, immortals descend; when the ways of immortals and humans converge, immortals leave. I am leaving to carry out the teaching of the age."²⁰

I duly prepared paper and ink and asked the Master to write the message. The Master said, "Originally I wanted you to record this, but you have already memorized all these words by heart." Having finished speaking, he departed. (JC 44, 488.2)

Lü here says that he has already finished the transmission of the Dao. Because Lu Xixing does not need the divine help any more, the Master is prepared to help those who do need his help – this is what he probably means by "carrying out the teachings of the age."

Immortals did not stop descending after the above conversation after all, and the community members were still able to communicate with divine guests for many years to come. Yet the above conversation shows that the human knowledge of the world of immortals is bound to be incomplete. When a practitioner starts cultivating, he is still unable to see immortals clearly. As he begins to achieve success, immortals may stop descending.

Spirit-writing creates a new alchemical community that includes both humans and immortals as its members. Divine guests, who behave like humans, establish intimate connections with Lu and his friends, and give them a chance to closely watch the world of immortals. Spirit-

the Southern Palace (*Nangong liexian Meng He* 南宮列仙孟河). It is not clear whether this figure corresponds to any known Daoist immortal.

²⁰ *Shijiao* 世教, lit. the teaching of the age, usually means the teaching of the sages, the way of Confucius and the Duke of Zhou 周公.

writing transforms alchemical cultivation into a process of gradual recognition of the true form of immortals.

Yet, the community members' knowledge of the divine world remains limited and vague. The success in cultivation draws them closer to the world of immortals, but at the same time prevents them from seeing the true face of the divine. Spirit-writing creates a liminal state between the human world and the world of immortals and makes an alchemical cultivation a journey in the twilight zone between the two worlds.

The Teachings

The teachings of the immortals as recorded in the treatise are numerous and not limited to internal alchemy. They teach about medicine, Feng Shui, and exorcism. They debate external alchemy, sexual practices, mind cultivation, and secret formulas (*koujue* 口訣). Even Buddhist monks sometimes descend to discuss various aspect of Buddhism.

The main purpose of the meetings with immortals is to help the community members in their self-cultivation practice. Immortals, however, never transfer alchemical knowledge in its completeness. Their instructions are situational, fragmentary, and vague. Immortals not only teach alchemical knowledge but also create an air of uncertainty that prompts Lu and his friends to seek their own answers to alchemical problems.

Immortals' instructions on alchemical cultivation are contextual. It is obvious that they adjust their teachings to the community members' progress. In the beginning, they may even refuse to give instructions. For example, once the Suys told Lu and his friends,

My master blames you for having meagre virtue. He accused me of transmitting knowledge too easily. Your mercury has already been accommodated; it is up to you how to deal with it.²¹ From this time on, we are not allowed to discuss it. (JC 44, 477.1)

This conversation occurred shortly after Lu started to interact with immortals. At that time, Lü Dongbin seemingly considered Lu and his

²¹ Mercury (*gong* 汞) here refers to the spirit or mind of a practitioner.

companions to be unworthy to receive his transmission yet, so he condemned Suze for transmitting the secret knowledge too easily.

In content, moreover, the teachings change over time. In the beginning, the immortals mainly teach basic mind cultivation. Later, they explain more advanced aspects of alchemical teaching, such as the "plucking the drug" (*caiyao* 採藥). In the end, they even discuss the final stages of alchemical cultivation: the formation of the yang-spirit (JC 44, 513.1-2) and the technique of "entering the womb" (*toutai* 投胎) (JC 44, 523.2).²² It is thus evident that the immortals accompany Lu and his companions on all stages of their alchemical journey.

In addition to matching the members' cultivation progress, the teachings are also relevant to their everyday life, and sometimes they descend unexpectedly to help the community during crucial moments. A case in point is the following:

On the first day of the 10th month, after sundown, we have just finished to refine a drug and started to nourish it.²³ Suddenly Master Zhongli Quan descended and, flaunting his sleeves around, began to sing, "Heaven and Earth are numinous, creation and transformation are covetous, the day of destiny has not come yet, and mind is a beholder." In this way, he, dancing and singing, passed inside and outside the house several dozen times. Then he sat down on the ground and ordered us to sit down in a row. (JC 44, 486.2)

²² Eskildsen (2006) calls the practice of "entering a womb" and similar techniques "emergency death meditations." Their purpose was to help an alchemist "to avoid passing into a disembodied or subhuman state" (Eskildsen 2006: 373) in case he was not able to form a yang-spirit and achieve immortality.

²³ In this passage, Lu describes the process of preparing the external elixir (*waidan* 外丹). Lu and his companions practiced external (laboratory) alchemy for many years, and the *Sanzang zhenquan* contains many relevant instructions. Lu calls external alchemy the Earth Prime (*diyuan* 地元) and considers it not an alternative but rather an integral part of internal alchemical cultivation. I discuss this issue in more detail in my dissertation (Mozias, in progress).

Divine guests demonstrate detailed knowledge on how the disciples' cultivation proceeds. Thus, in the following passage the grand master descends to help fix some problems in preparing an external elixir:²⁴

On the 29th day, we were cleaning a tripod in a wing-room on the east of the altar. Suddenly, the grand master arrived. He ordered us to cover the tripod with a lid and said that at this time the drug in this tripod is already too old. The senior master ordered us to stop refining it. He promised to descend again at the *chen* hour (7-9 a.m.) on the 3rd day of the month and to transmit us something else. Because at that time Zhao was busy with his family affairs, the time of the meeting was changed to the *chen* hour of the 13th day. (JC 44, 516.2)

Here Lu does not describe the content of the grand master's instructions, but rather puts them into the context of time: a specific moment in the process of refining the drug, the time of the day and the date. The majority of instructions of immortals in the treatise refer to a particular problem encountered by a particular practitioner on a particular stage of cultivation on a particular day and time.

The community members meet various immortals whose instructions may sometimes contradict each other. In the following episode, Lü Dongbin refutes the instructions given by another immortal:

The Master asked, "Is the elixir of you two already ready? Who taught you to dry up the mercury so recklessly?" I replied, "Master Xuanzhen ordered us to do so."²⁵ The Master said, "Even studying with me, you do not study properly. Your understanding of the teaching is not profound enough, *qi* is again leaking out, fire phasing has not been adjusted, you are short of the mother-ingredient and your virtue is deficient. How could you possibly be able to gather the drug completely?" (JC 44, 478.1)

Lu's own instructions, however, may also be unclear or incomplete. Lu comments on one of such instructions:

²⁴ Lu refers to two immortals by the title "grand master," Zhongli Quan and Meng He. Here he probably refers to Meng.

²⁵ Master Xuanzhen 玄真子 is an ancient immortal. His biography appears in several collections of the biographies of immortals. See e.g. Xu xianzhuan 續仙傳 (Sequel to Biographies of immortals, DZ 295).

Note: Since my companions and I are only beginners, the Master stopped the discussion here. Yet, it is indeed the practice of cultivating oneself with a jade liquid. It should not be slandered. (JC 44, 474.2)

The Master's instructions seem to be so vague that Lu feels it necessary to defend their truthfulness, arguing that their incompleteness reflects a low level of the practitioners' own achievements.

Not all communications with immortals contain valuable knowledge. Sometimes, Lu and his companions become observers who watch divine guests' performance and try to guess what message this performance is supposed to convey:

On the 11th day of the 8th month, we offered congratulations to the Master Embracing Mystery (Liu Haichan) on his birthday at the Circumpolar Tower.²⁶ We have finished congratulating the Master, but senior disciple Yu did not come. Suddenly, a very martial and fierce god descended. He untied a sword, which hanged [on the altar?], put it on the waist, in big strides walked several times around the altar, with a brush wrote a message, which said that he was secretly sent to inquire after [our?] traces. When we again met another day, he retrieved the sword to the roof beam and departed. (JC 44, 511.1)

Lu diligently records a martial god's ritual performance, but he cannot discern its purpose and meaning.

The instructions are personal, contextual, not universally true, and may contradict each other. The community members not only receive and record the divine instructions, but also actively participate in the transmission of alchemical knowledge. They openly express their doubts, ask questions, compare instructions received at different times or from different immortals, and reflect on their own cultivation and life. Immortals are interlocutors who urge them to contemplate over the deep alchemical secrets. Sometimes, such contemplation may lead to enlightenment. Lu writes:

²⁶ Lu calls Liu Haichan the Master Embracing Mystery Liu (Hanxuan Liu Shi 含玄劉師), or just the Master Embracing [Mystery] (Han Shi 含師).

After parting with the Master, I recorded his words and immediately started to meditate. All of a sudden, I attained truthful understanding and wrote the following poem, which I presented to the Master:

Right between the end of one month and the beginning of the next,
The two parts of the tally merge with each other.
Nothingness contains being, being returns to nothingness.
Watch how the end of one month becomes the next:
The waxing crescent moon on the *geng* day.²⁷ (JC 44, 487.2)

Lu starts to meditate immediately after the meeting with the Master. He achieves enlightenment and writes a poem that expresses his understanding of the essence of alchemical cultivation. Conversations with the divine guests culminate in Lu's enlightenment and writing.

Immortals actively participate in the cultivation of the members of Lu's community. They descend during crucial moments of cultivation, give instructions and adjust their teaching to their disciples' cultivation progress. However, they sometimes give no instructions, and their appearance during crucial moments of cultivation may be more important than the content of their teachings. They neither give complete answers to the community members' questions, nor dispel their doubts. They rather embody the process of intellectual inquiry and prompt the community members to think, to contemplate, and to transform themselves.

Conclusion

Do alchemists need to communicate with immortals? Lu never explicitly claims that one cannot succeed in cultivation without communicating with immortals. Yet, immortals play an important role in the cultivation of his community. They accompany Lu and his friends on all stages of alchemical cultivation and help them to achieve enlightenment. Alchemical cultivation became a journey to the world of immortals in the company of immortals. This approach to alchemical cultivation seems to

²⁷ *Geng* 庚 indicates the 3rd day of a lunar month and symbolizes the beginning of a new cycle of transformation. It is a part of the matching stems of the moon (*yueti najia* 月體納甲), a system that correlates the lunar phases with the heavenly stems (*tiangan* 天干) and with the trigrams of the *Yijing*.

uniquely suit those literati who wish to practice internal alchemy without leaving their habitual social circle.

Lu and his companions try to change themselves without changing their everyday lives. They waste no time in the search for a true human master – great immortals themselves come to teach them alchemical secrets via spirit-writing. They need not abandon their wives and children in order to be able to cultivate unperturbed—the twilight between the world of humans and the world of immortals, created during the spirit-writing séances is the ideal “space” for cultivation. They ought not to stop their intellectual pursuits – alchemical cultivation is the loftiest of all intellectual endeavors. The ritual of spirit-writings transforms their ordinary life – the life full of doubts, uncertainty and constant self-reflection—into the life of alchemical cultivation. Paradoxically, Lu and his companions meet immortal beings in order to remain ordinary humans—even in their quest for immortality.

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