The Story of Han Xiangzi
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The karmic seeds for this book were planted in two graduate seminars I attended at the University of British Columbia in 1992 as a student in the doctoral program in Asian Studies. Looking for a text to write a paper on, I stumbled across The Story of the Immortal Han (Han xian zhuan 韓仙傳), a novella from perhaps the Yuan or early Ming dynasty. Intrigued by the subject matter, I decided to pursue it further in another seminar the next semester by translating two chapters (6 & 7) of the late Ming dynasty vernacular novel The Story of Han Xiangzi (Han Xiangzi quanzhuan 韓湘子全傳; lit., The Complete Story of Han Xiangzi) and analyzing their key theme of the trials and tests a candidate for immortality needs to undergo. The instructors of these two seminars, Gary Arbuckle and Daniel L. Overmyer, gave valuable comments on these papers, which ultimately provided a foundation for the present book.

Over the next years, my mind was focused on other things, primarily my dissertation work on a spirit-writing cult in central Taiwan. However, even then Han Xiangzi did not completely vanish from my mental horizon. It so happened that he was the “immortal teacher” (xianshi 仙師) of the cult’s spirit-writing medium, and his carved image sat in a glass case on a side altar. My affinity with Han Xiangzi was strengthened when during my field work at the spirit-writing temple I was adopted as a disciple by the immortal Lü Dongbin. As Lü was also the teacher of Han Xiangzi, we were now practically brothers!

However, it was not until 2000 that the seeds planted eight years earlier finally
germinated in a summer research project in which I explored the possibility of a broader study of Han Xiangzi and his legends. I produced a draft translation of *The Story of Han Xiangzi*—and was hooked. Since that summer I have pursued the traces of the immortal more or less constantly, though at different levels of intensity, depending on how much time my other obligations left me. The largest chunk of work was completed during a year of research leave between 2001 and 2002, two months of which I spent as a visiting scholar at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, in Taipei. There I continued working on the translation, even while making good use of the marvelous library collections of the Academia Sinica to gather data on other aspects of the Han Xiangzi story cycle. My advisor at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy was Lee Fong-mao 李豐楨, whose contributions to this work cannot be overstated. An extremely busy and prolific scholar, Professor Lee still devoted many evening hours at his house near the campus of Cheng-chi University to go over the translation manuscript with me and discuss difficult issues. He was not required to give up so much of his personal time for the benefit of a junior visiting scholar, but he did. His zeal for scholarship and his infectious enthusiasm know no bounds, and extend far beyond his office and office hours. I am forever in his debt.

Many other people in Taiwan helped with advice and friendship, and in many practical ways. I would especially like to mention Daniel Altschuler, Paul R. Katz, Li Shih-wei 李世偉, Meir Shahar, Wang Chien-ch’uan 王見川, and Zhou Zhiren 周志仁. Lu Xianghua 盧祥華 is a good friend who has rendered selfless assistance numerous times since I met him and his delightful family during my very first stay in Taiwan in 1989–90. This time he was again invaluable in facilitating my visits to temples in southern Taiwan, where Han Xiangzi is worshipped to the present day. Cheng Meng-hsun 鄭孟訓 and many other members of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂 in Taichung contributed their friendship and support in many ways, linking this project with my earlier work on Taiwanese spirit-writing cults.

After my return from Taiwan, I shared parts of my work with many colleagues, either individually or as part of workshops and conferences. A particular thank you goes to Robert Hegel and Wilt Idema, whose detailed comments on the manuscript helped to greatly improve the final version. Many other colleagues contributed advice, ideas, sources, and other materials, among them Robert Ford Campany, Steve Eskildsen, Monica Esposito, Vincent Goossaert, Rania Huntington, Dan Lusthaus, Dan Overmyer, Elena Valussi, and Richard Wang. Nobumi Iyanaga came to the rescue when the publisher’s software proved incompatible with mine. His expert advice and provision of a conversion script solved the prob-
lem very elegantly. More expertise, this time in photo reproduction, came from my uncle, Gerhard Prasser. As a professional photographer, he prepared the text’s woodblock illustrations for print. Lorri Hagman of the University of Washington Press believed in this book right from the beginning. Her enthusiasm greatly encouraged me to redouble my efforts and get it done. In this task I was aided by the Press’s able editorial staff, especially Marilyn Trueblood and Rachel Scollon. Of course, none of the above-named is responsible for this book’s remaining shortcomings, which I hope its readers will point out to me in a spirit of constructive criticism.

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All of the above help and assistance, however, would have come to nothing if I did not have the support of my family: my wife Uschi, my daughters Anna, Laura, and Sarah, and my mother Inge. Their gifts of time and encouragement were indispensable. To them I dedicate this book.

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