The Story of Han Xiangzi

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The present volume offers to the English-speaking world the first translation into any Western language of the early seventeenth-century Chinese novel *Han Xiangzi quanzhuan* (韓湘子全傳, lit., “The complete story of Han Xiangzi”), by Yang Erzeng 楊爾曾, a writer and publisher from the beautiful city of Hangzhou in southeastern China. Before reading of Han Xiangzi’s adventures, the reader will benefit from learning something of the story’s protagonist and of elements of Chinese popular and religious culture.

**HAN XIANGZI**

The hero of this story is the Daoist immortal Han Xiangzi 韓湘子. This figure is nowadays best known as one of the “Eight Immortals” (Baxian 八仙): Zhongli Quan 鍾離權, Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, Zhang Guolao 張果老, Li Tieguai 李鐵拐, He Xiangu 何仙姑, Lan Caihe 藍采和, Cao Guojiu 曹國舅, and Han Xiangzi. These immortals came together as a group by the late Song dynasty (12th–13th cent.), with only occasional variations in their composition.¹

Probably the earliest appearance of an Eight Immortals group is in a wall painting of a Jin dynasty tomb (Taihe 泰和 period, 1201–09), reflecting a popularity that continued into the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), with the immortals as motifs on incense burners, clothing, and folk art.² Dramatists of the Yuan period also picked up the Eight Immortals theme and produced the first literary codifications
of their lore. In Yuan drama, the Eight Immortals appear in “deliverance plays” (dutuoju 度脱劇), which usually focus on only a few members of the group, most prominently Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin. By the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the Eight Immortals had come to occupy a firm place in the dramatic repertoire. They appeared both in full-length plays and in short skits performed on auspicious occasions such as birthdays (Baxian qingshou 八仙慶壽), works which, especially the latter, remain a fixture in local opera traditions across China. The Ming period also saw the first full narrative development of the Eight Immortals complex in the form of a novel, Journey to the East (Dongyou ji 八仙遊記) by Wu Yuan-tai 吳元泰. Much of the later Eight Immortals lore is linked with this important text, including the famous story of their crossing of the ocean (Baxian guohai 八仙過海). This became a staple motif in folk art and can still be found today painted on Taiwanese temple walls and stitched on bright red cloths (baxiancai 八仙彩) that are hung over entrances to bring blessings to buildings and their inhabitants. Thus, since the Ming dynasty the Eight Immortals have found a firm place in Chinese popular culture, their stories transmitted through the theater, folk art, storytelling, novels, and popular literature such as “precious volumes” (baojuan 寶卷).

Each of the Eight Immortals also is the center of an independent story cycle outside the Baxian collective, though the extent of these cycles differs greatly for individual immortals. The most developed lore attaches to the figure of Lü Dongbin, who has been the object of many plays, stories, ballads, novels, and even of religious veneration in important Daoist movements. Han Xiangzi has not received as much attention as Lü Dongbin, but probably more than any of the other six immortals.

Han Xiangzi is said to be a nephew or grandnephew of the famous Tang dynasty Confucian scholar Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824). And indeed there are reliable indications that Han Yu did have a relative named Han Xiang, a son of Han Yu’s nephew Han Laocheng 韓老成. In 819, Han Xiang and his brother Han Pang 韓滂 followed Han Yu into his exile to Chaozhou 潮州, where he had been banished for criticizing the emperor’s worship of a Buddha relic. In 820, the brothers followed their great-uncle to a new post in Yuanzhou 貢州, where Han Pang died at the age of nineteen.

According to the historical records, Han Xiang was born in 793 and passed the jinshi examination in 823. His style (a name taken upon reaching adulthood) was Beizhu 北渚 and his highest official appointment was assistant minister in the Court of Judicial Review. His death date is unclear. The Complete Poems of
the Tang Dynasty (Quan Tang shi 全唐詩) contains a handful of poems addressed to Han Xiang by various authors. The most famous of these is the one that is immediately connected with the appearance of the Han Xiangzi legend. Han Yu composed it in 819 at Blue Pass 藍關 on his way into exile in Chaozhou, Guangdong:

“Demoted I Arrive at Blue Pass and Show This Poem to My Brother’s Grandson Han Xiang”

A sealed epistle submitted at dawn to Ninefold Heaven—
Exiled at dusk to Chaozhou, eight thousand leagues to travel.

Wishing to save His Sagacious Brilliance from treacherous evils,
Could I have cared for the years that remain in my withered limbs?

Clouds straddle the mountains of Qin—where is my home?
Snows crowd the pass at Blue Pass—my horse will not move.

I know what the reason must be that makes you come so far—
The better to gather my bones from shores of miasmic water.¹⁴

The poem expresses Han Yu’s relief on seeing his nephew arrive amidst the heavy snow at the Blue Pass in the Qin mountain range south of Chang’an. Nothing in the sparse existing biographical data on Han Xiang indicates any deeper meaning, yet this poem was to become central in the evolving Han Xiangzi lore. It was taken to refer to Han Xiangzi’s arrival at Han Yu’s side to rescue him by means of his supernatural powers, and to deliver him from his worldly delusions and allow him to become an immortal.

In terms of historical sources there is of course a serious problem. The historical Han Xiang seems to have led a fairly conventional life, enjoyed a moderately successful official career, and apparently had no particular Daoist leanings. So what does he have to do with the Daoist immortal who delivers Han Yu at Blue Pass? Well, possibly he was conflated with another relative of Han Yu’s who indeed is said to have possessed magical abilities. Among Han Yu’s writings we find a poem (dating to the year 799) in which he records the visit of a distant relative who claimed to possess extraordinary skills. The relevant passages are found in verses 15 through 22:
“Presented to a Distant Nephew”

Who is that knocking on the door?
To my inquiry he replies that he is of my clan.
He claims to possess magical powers,
That he has investigated the marvels of the cosmos and understands
the workings of Heaven.
It is of no use to regret the past,
But I shall be glad to have success in the future.
If indeed yours are not just artful words,
I should become a man who is useful to his times.¹⁵

Han Yu thus receives a visitor who claims to be of his lineage, obviously of a lower
generation than Han Yu, as the latter addresses him in the poem’s title as a “dis-tant
nephew” (zuzhi 族侄, a nephew in the generalized sense of a distant relative
of a younger generation). The visitor claims to have magical skills and to be able
to predict the future. Han Yu himself was thirty-two at the time of this event.

These two poems, one mentioning the visit of a supernaturally gifted “distant
nephew” in 799, the other about Han Yu’s encounter with his grandnephew Han
Xiang at Blue Pass twenty years later, together are the starting point for the Han
Xiangzi legend. Its core features are Han Xiangzi’s prediction of Han Yu’s predica-
ment at Blue Pass, from which he then comes to rescue him. Chronologically it is
impossible for Han Xiang to be the “distant nephew” mentioned in the 799 poem
(he would have been about six years of age at the time), but attention to detail is
not a great concern of myth-makers. And so, very early on we find tales about an
unusually gifted relative of Han Yu. The first instance occurs in a text composed
by a near-contemporary of Han Yu and Han Xiang, Duan Chengshi’s 段成式
(803–63) Miscellaneous Morsels from the South Slope of You Mountain
(Youyang zazu 酉陽雜俎).¹⁶ Duan records that a distant nephew of Han Yu has been taken
into his household to be educated. The nephew, however, turns out to be unruly
and unwilling to study. When Han Yu confronts him, the nephew claims to have
another skill, namely that of growing multicolored peonies. He prepares such a
plant for Han Yu, and when after several weeks it blossoms, on its petals are inscribed
the fifth and sixth verses of Han Yu’s poem of 819. The nephew then declares his
unwillingness to enter officialdom, and leaves. The nephew is not named, but the
verses appearing on the flower petals become a part of later Han Xiangzi lore.

Through the Five Dynasties and early Song period we find more stories (in
the anecdotal literature and also in Daoist hagiography) about the mysterious rel-
ative of Han Yu, whose magical powers grow over time. The earliest explicit link-
ing of the themes in the two poems appears in the famous Daoist Du Guangting’s Supplemental Collection of Immortals’ Biographies (Xianzhuan shiyi),\(^\text{17}\) where the nephew prepares the peonies and departs. Han Yu is banished and encounters the same nephew at Blue Pass. The next spring the peonies open and are found to be inscribed with the two verses. Here, for the first time, it is also claimed that the nephew later transmitted the Dao to Han Yu.

This version contains an implicit identification of the nephew with Han Xiang. (Problematically, the nephew here is called a waisheng, i.e., a nephew through a female member of Han Yu’s lineage, which does not fit Han Xiang’s profile. But again, historical exactitude is not the first concern here.) The first time this identification is made explicit is in Liu Fu’s collection of anecdotes, Remarkable Opinions under the Green-Latticed Window (Qingsuo gaoyi),\(^\text{18}\) From here on the core of Han Xiangzi lore is estab-
lished: Han Xiangzi as an unconventional and Daoist-leaning nephew who by means of a magical flower trick predicts Han Yu’s banishment, saves him in his predicament at Blue Pass, and later transmits the Dao to him. Later sources elaborate on this core and add elements such as Han Xiangzi’s earlier existence as a numinous white crane, his apprenticeship with Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin, his unconsummated marriage, and his later deliverance of his wife and his aunt.

Most of these themes probably came together for the first time in the popular performance genre of the “Daoist songs” (daoqing), which emerged during the Song period.\(^\text{19}\) Thematically, these songs either express Daoist sentiments and ideas concerning self and society, or narrate the lives and deeds of Daoist immortals. Daoqing are sung by one or more performers, accompanied by two instruments: the fisher drum (yugu) and the clappers (jianban). The frontispiece of this book shows Han Xiangzi holding these two instruments. A typical fisher drum is cylindrical and is made of bamboo or wood with a leather membrane covering one end. It is usually at least one meter in length and thirteen to fourteen centimeters in diameter. The clappers are two slats of bamboo or wood, sixty to seventy centimeters long and about four centimeters wide. While the right hand strikes the drum, the left hand shakes the elastic clappers so that they strike against each other, providing rhythm and emphasis to the song.

For their tunes, early daoqing mostly drew on the popular songs that also influ-
enced the ci 詞, poetry of the literary circles of the Song and the operatic arias (qupai 曲牌) of the Yuan. In fact, some of these tunes may have started out as daoqing (e.g., the “Shuahai’er” 虚孩兒 and the “Zaoluopao” 皂羅袍 tunes). The songs were often performed publicly by itinerant Daoists as a way of spreading
their religion and collecting alms. Some of the early patriarchs of the new Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) School of Daoism composed daoqing that are still preserved in their collected writings. There also existed local groups of Daoist laypeople who performed daoqing at temple festivals for the creation of merit and the entertainment of the gods. Over time, professional performers adopted the genre and developed its thematic range beyond its Daoist focus, including less obviously religious story lines. However, even to this day, Daoist themes still figure prominently in all regional daoqing traditions, and stories about the exploits of Han Xiangzi are among the most widespread. In fact, it has been suggested that the Han Xiangzi stories were one of the earliest thematic complexes of daoqing.

If, as Wu Yimin hypothesizes, the regional origin of the genre as a whole truly is in the Zhongnan Mountains south of Xi'an, Shaanxi, a focus on Han Xiangzi would make a lot of sense, since much of his story takes place in this area.

The daoqing genre, especially in its narrative variety, influenced the development of Chinese theater. As already mentioned, some operatic tunes may have been adopted from daoqing, while daoqing over time gradually adopted more theatrical features. Around the middle of the Qing period (18th cent.), we witness the emergence of local opera traditions that are closely based on daoqing tunes and conventions (“daoqing drama,” daoqingxi 道情戲). Here daoqing music and song are combined with an acting out of the narrated story. The Han Xiangzi motif figures prominently in the earliest such plays. While this development for the most part occurs fairly late in Chinese history, there survives one local tradition of daoqing drama that may arguably go back as early as the thirteenth century: the “Blue Pass drama” (Languanxi 藍關戲) of Ye County 楚縣, Shandong, an area with strong historical links to Complete Perfection Daoism. The Han Xiangzi story cycle is a centerpiece of the repertoire in this local tradition.20

Daoqing remained a popular genre throughout the Late Imperial period. For the Ming period we have at least two interesting pieces of evidence for daoqing performances of Han Xiangzi stories. The literatus Li Xu 李訥 (1505–93) mentions that Daoist priests sing daoqing such as “The Blue Pass” (Languan ji 藍關記) and “The Journey to the West” (Xiyou ji 西遊記).21 The other source is a scene in the novel The Plum in the Golden Vase (Jinpingmei 金瓶梅) where young actors perform a daoqing called “Lord Han is Blocked by Snow at Blue Pass” (Han Zigong xueyong Languan 韓子公雪擁藍關).22 As The Plum in the Golden Vase was completed around the turn of the seventeenth century, this demonstrates that daoqing on Han Xiangzi’s exploits were popular in the lifetime of Yang Erzeng, the author of The Story of Han Xiangzi. In fact, the preface to The Story of Han Xiangzi explicitly mentions that Han Xiangzi’s
story is only transmitted by the blind storytellers, who either sing in a loud voice while holding documents like officials, or recite ballads in a wild manner dressed up as Daoist priests, sighing three times for every line they chant. These stories everywhere delight the hearts of ignorant people and village matrons, and are listened to by school teachers and their pupils.

The preface’s author bemoans the vulgarity of these renditions, and praises the novel’s author for his more elegant treatment of the theme. It is implied that popular ballads such as daoqing were one important source for the novel, and their influence is still clearly visible in the numerous daoqing-style songs incorporated into the text.

However, daoqing were not the only source Yang Erzeng could draw on. We have two surviving Han Xiangzi texts that antedate Yang’s novel. The first is a novella called The Immortal Han (Han xian zhuan 韓仙傳), which may date from somewhere between the late Yuan and middle Ming periods. The second is a southern-style drama from the Ming period, Ascension to Immortality: How Han Xiangzi Attempted Nine Times to Deliver Wengong (Han Xiangzi jiudu Wengong shengxian ji 韓湘子九度文公昇仙記).

While the novella has a more generalized influence on the novel, there exist very concrete overlaps with the drama Ascension to Immortality. Dialogues in the novel occasionally resemble those in the drama, and at least three songs in the novel are identical with or (in one case) very close to arias in Ascension to Immortality. The novel also incorporates structural features of the southern-style (chuanqi 傳奇) dramatic tradition, such as the typical reunion of all actors in the last scene/chapter. A study of the songs appearing in The Story of Han Xiangzi has led one scholar to surmise that the novel is based on one southern-style and three northern-style (zaju 雜劇) dramas, a hypothesis that is further supported by the novel’s frequent use of theatrical idioms.

Drawing thus on both existing literary elaborations of the Han Xiangzi story and on popular traditions, The Story of Han Xiangzi weaves these strands together into the hitherto most complex and developed version of Han Xiangzi lore. Its earliest surviving edition dates to 1623. The storyline begins in the Han dynasty, where Han Xiangzi’s previous incarnation is a beautiful but haughty woman, who is consequently reborn as a white crane. The crane cultivates himself and meets Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin. They deliver him to be reborn as the son of Han Yu’s elder brother Han Hui 韓會. After Han Hui’s and his wife’s death, Han Xiangzi is raised in Han Yu’s household, where he is treated like a
son (as he is the only male offspring of the Han family). Han Yu has great expectations of Han Xiangzi, but the latter follows his destiny and runs away from home to join his masters Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin in the Zhongnan Mountains. There he practices inner alchemy and becomes an immortal. The Jade Emperor sends him back to earth to deliver his uncle Han Yu, his aunt, and his wife, Lin Luying 林麓英. After many failed attempts to break down Han Yu’s Confucian obstinacy, he delivers him at Blue Pass, and later does the same for his aunt and wife.

The story has a strong anti-Confucian element, and was clearly written by an author knowledgeable in matters of inner alchemy. The prose narrative alternates with an unusually large number of poetic passages, many of which give rather profound summaries of alchemical wisdom. It is a didactic novel that teaches the superiority of Daoism over Confucianism and provides quite practical lessons in Daoist cultivation.

This novel is the great summa of Han Xiangzi lore, and as such had an enormous influence on the Han Xiangzi literature of the following Qing period (1644–1911). Here we find the Han Xiangzi theme being taken up in various forms of popular literature: precious scrolls (baojuan), ballads (tanci, dagushu), local theater. The focus remains on the theme of deliverance, though in the popular texts attention often shifts from the deliverance of Han Yu to that of Xiangzi’s wife Luying, or Lin Ying 林英, as she is usually called in the popular genres. Given the large female component in the audience for this literature, such a shift is understandable. There exists a significant enough number of such popular works to show that Han Xiangzi remained a well-known figure through the Qing period. Among the Eight Immortals, he is perhaps second only to Lü Dongbin in the number of surviving texts devoted to him as an individual.

To the present day, the story of Han Yu and Han Xiangzi is well known in many areas of China, in particular in those regions that served as backdrops to events in the legend. French scholar Adeline Herrou encountered many of its plot elements in the local lore of southern Shaanxi province, an area close to the Zhongnan Mountains where Han Xiangzi and Han Yu pursued their spiritual journeys. At the center of her study is the Wengong Temple in the city of Hanzhong, whose principal deity is Han Yu. Local knowledge of Han Yu emphasizes his relationship with Han Xiangzi. Both laypeople and resident Quanzhen Daoist monks recount life stories of their deity that owe more to the Han Xiangzi story cycle than to official history. The nearby Zhongnan Mountains are dotted with temples, caves, and landmarks that are linked in some way or another with Han Xiangzi and his uncle. Another major center of worship for Han Yu, with a secondary cult
of Han Xiangzi, is to be found in Chaozhou, Han Yu’s place of banishment in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Emigrants from Chaozhou have carried this cult to the island of Taiwan, where both figures are worshipped to the present day in a handful of temples in the south.32

The pivotal work in the whole Han Xiangzi tradition clearly is the Han Xiangzi quanzhuan. In addition to its importance in the development of Han Xiangzi’s lore, this novel deserves closer attention, first because it is a well-crafted and entertaining work of literature whose literary qualities have been considerably underrated so far, and second because it is a fascinating attempt to package Daoist inner alchemy in a belles-lettres format. Thus the present translation should be of interest to students of Chinese folklore, literature, and religion, as well as to those who simply seek a good read.

THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

The earliest editions of The Story of Han Xiangzi are ascribed to a certain Man of Mt. Pheasant-Yoke (Ziheng Shanren 雉衡山人), one of Yang Erzeng’s noms de plume. Yang’s biography is not recorded in the standard collections, and his life dates are unknown. However, pulling together bits and pieces of evidence, we can at least provide a sketch of our author and his social context.

Yang’s style was Shenglu 聖魯; he lived in the city of Qiantang 錢塘 (modern-day Hangzhou 杭州) around the turn of the seventeenth century.33 Yang was a scholar and printer who ran two publishing houses in Qiantang. One was called the Hall of Purity in Poverty (Yibai Tang 夷白堂), the other the Thatched Abode of Mysteries (Caoxuan Ju 草玄居).34 The former is the source of another sobriquet of his: Master of Purity in Poverty (Yibai Zhuren 夷白主人). He was an educated man who could write an elegant hand and counted well-known literati among his acquaintances. While he was modest about his erudition (“I have only very few classical works at home and my knowledge is very lowly”35), the well-known historian Chen Bangzhan 陳邦瞻 (d. 1623) praised him as a “learned and accomplished man of many parts, leisurely and reclusive in manner.”36 A certain Fang Menglai 方夢來 concurs that his “friend Yang” was “learned and accomplished” and adds that he “took delight in seeking out unusual things.”37 While Fang may have spoken here with specific reference to Yang’s project of collecting maps and landscape prints from all over China, the diverse nature of Yang’s publications does show both catholicity of taste and a pronounced interest in the “unusual.”

The two characterizations of Yang just cited are found in prefaces to Yang’s Extraordinary Sights in China (Hainei qiguan 海內奇觀), a collection of pictorial
materials on famous Chinese mountains and temples, with accompanying texts. In effect, this is what we would today call an “armchair traveler’s book,” written explicitly for the person who wants to see the sights of China without having to leave the comforts of home. The Chinese term for “armchair travel” is *woyou* (traveling while reclining), and Yang’s love of this activity explains his sobriquet *Daoist Who Travels while Reclining* (*Woyou Daoren*). *Extraordinary Sights in China*, in ten volumes (juan) and with more than 130 illustrations, was printed in a lavishly appointed edition in Yang’s Hall of Purity in Poverty around 1610. It had been preceded in 1607 by another upscale “coffee-table book,” an anthology of reproduced paintings: *Tuhui zongyi*, in eight juan, also printed at Yang’s shop. Thus, one strain of Yang’s interest in the unusual found expression in his fascination with pictorial art and its reproduction.

Two other strains are more immediately relevant for the background of *The Story of Han Xiangzi*: Yang’s Daoist leanings and his interest in vernacular novels. His Daoist interests are documented by his involvement as compiler or editor of at least two Daoist works. The first is titled *Records of Immortal Beauties* (*Xianyuan jishi*); it is a collection of hagiographies of female immortals, with a postface by Yang dated to 1602. While *Records of Immortal Beauties* was compiled by Yang himself, he apparently merely edited and corrected *Record of the Ancestral Teachings of the Perfected Lord Xu’s [Way of] Purity and Light* (*Xu Zhenjun jingming zongjiao lu*), in fifteen juan. This is a collection of texts by and on the third century immortal Xu Xun, published in 1604. Yang’s forays into the world of vernacular novels yielded two results: *The Story of Han Xiangzi* and *Romance of the Eastern and Western Jin Dynasties* (*Dong-Xi liang Jin yanyi*). *Romance of the Eastern and Western Jin Dynasties* is a fictionalized account of the battles and intrigues of the third and fourth centuries. Yang’s preface reveals that this was not an original work of his, but the result of the editorial efforts he expended on a manuscript offered him by a friend and colleague, the Master of Great Peace Hall (Taihe Zhuren). Yang’s final trace in the literary world of the late Ming period is, to my knowledge, his function as copy editor of an anthology of Chan poetry by the Song poet Su Shi (1036–1101). This nicely rounds off our picture of a scholar-publisher of the early seventeenth century who thrived on the vibrant cultural scene of Qiantang. In the open-minded atmosphere of a major cultural center away from the capital, Yang was part of a world of literati who pursued highly eclectic interests untrammeled by overly strong concerns for orthodoxy. As copy editor of Buddhist poetry, compiler and editor of Daoist hagiographical collections, publisher of expensive art albums, and—last but not least—writer and editor of vernacular novels,
Yang Erzeng likely moved easily among the literati of Qiantang and beyond. Notable scholars of the time contributed prefaces to Yang’s works, and these men seemed to share Yang’s wide-ranging and rather unorthodox interests. For example, Feng Mengzhen 馮夢禎 (1546–1605), who wrote a preface to Yang’s Records of Immortal Beauties, composed commentaries on the Daoist classics Laozi and Zhuangzi, compiled a collection of miscellaneous notes on supernatural phenomena, and was a disciple of the famous female Daoist “saint” Tanyangzi 曾陽子.42 Ge Yinliang 葛寅良 (jinshi 1601) was the author of a preface to Yang’s Extraordinary Sights in China and of commentaries to Confucian classics, and also compiled an important gazetteer of Buddhist monasteries in Jinling 金陵 (now Nanjing 南京).43

Yang Erzeng thus moved in exactly the kind of social circles that Andrew Plaks regards as the cradle of the literati novel, and his Han Xiangzi explicitly emulates the paradigmatic works of this new genre: Record of the Three Kingdoms, Water Margin, The Journey to the West, and The Plum in the Golden Vase.44 Yang’s intellectual and social background provided ample opportunity for the pursuit and discussion of very diverse and less than orthodox interests, and he took full advantage of these circumstances to delve into the history, lore, and practice of Daoism. His two hagiographical collections are evidence of these pursuits, but they really come to fruition in The Story of Han Xiangzi, a novel written with a clear didactic purpose: to extol the wonders of the inner alchemy tradition of Daoist cultivation over any transient glories that the world might offer.

DAOISM AND THE STORY OF HAN XIANGZI

As mentioned above, prior to writing Han Xiangzi, Yang Erzeng had been involved in the publication of two Daoist collections: one hagiographical (Records of Immortal Beauties), the other combining hagiographical and systematic-doctrinal elements (Record of the Ancestral Teachings of the Perfected Lord Xu’s [Way of] Purity and Light). The Story of Han Xiangzi combines both Daoist styles: it narrates the exploits of a Daoist immortal and instructs in a key method of Daoist cultivation—inner alchemy (neidan 内丹).45 To elucidate Han Xiangzi’s double function as hagiography and introduction to inner alchemy, we need to take a brief look at these elements of the Daoist tradition.

But first: what is Daoism? Though used in the singular, Daoism is not a single thing. It is a general term for a uniquely Chinese religious tradition that has produced over the centuries a large variety of movements, practices, and ideas, and has had a profound influence on Chinese culture as a whole. Daoism comes in many shapes and sizes, and its representatives include philosophers, alchemists,
diviners, poets, priests, magicians, monks, and nuns. The unifying element for all of these diverse expressions is the idea of the Dao, the Way, the conviction that the multiplicity of phenomena in the visible world is rooted in a unitary ultimate reality. Although the Daodejing claims in its very first chapter that “the Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao,” the following definition by Livia Kohn may still give us an idea of the concept’s scope of meaning:

The [D]ao, if we then try to grasp it, can be described as the organic order underlying and structuring and pervading all existence. It is organic in that it is not willful, but it is also order because it changes in predictable rhythms and orderly patterns. If one is to approach it, reason and intellect have to be left behind. One can only intuit it when one has become as nameless and as free of conscious choices and evaluations as the [D]ao itself.46

If such is the Way, Daoism can then be understood as the large diversity of ways to approach and harmonize with this Dao. These ways include the philosophical mysticism of Zhuangzi, the statecraft of the Daodejing, the alchemy of Ge Hong, the millenarianism of Zhang Daoling and the early Celestial Master movement, and the visualization meditations of the Supreme Clarity adepts, to name just a few. Daoist ritual, alchemy, and meditation served to harmonize communities with the Dao and enable individuals to merge with it, thus ultimately coming to share in its eternal constancy—in other words, becoming immortal.47

To rise up into the ranks of the immortals (xian 仙) was already an ideal in the classical period, when Zhuangzi praised the absolute freedom of these wondrous beings—freedom from death and all other limitations. Throughout Chinese history, emperors sent out searches for such immortals and their mythical lands, such as the Kunlun Mountains or the Isles of Penglai, in the hope of obtaining from them the secret of immortality. Stories about immortals, their adventures in the heavens, and their appearances in the world of humans were featured in popular lore, hagiographical collections, poetry, and the “records of the strange” (zhiguai 志怪)—a genre that began in the third century CE and is generally regarded as the earliest form of narrative fiction in China.

The pursuit of immortality is the driving force in the plot of The Story of Han Xiangzi. The principal means employed for its attainment is “inner alchemy,” a reformulation of the more ancient operative alchemy (“external alchemy,” waidan 外丹) as a meditational-physiological practice. Here the metals and minerals of external alchemy are reinterpreted as substances and energies within the human
body, whose careful manipulation can lengthen a person’s life and ultimately lead to immortality. Alchemy is predicated on the reversal of the cosmogonical process described in chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*:

> The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three, three begets the myriad creatures.48

If the Daoist’s goal is union with the primordial, unified, and unchanging Dao, this can then only be achieved through the reversal of this process, i.e., by reducing the multiplicity of phenomena until one merges them and guides them back into the single source from which they arose. To this end, the multiple energies of the human body are fused and circulated in cyclical movements (orbits, *zhoutian* 周天), which pass through two channels, one ascending along the spine from the coccyx to the head, and one descending in the front of the body. These channels have nodal points, called “passes” (*guan* 關), which need to be kept free from obstructions for the circulation to function. In *Han Xiangzi*, the “double spinal passes” (*jiaji shuangguan* 夾脊雙關), located between the shoulder blades, are particularly emphasized as crucial. These channels connect three energy centers of the body, viz., the lower, middle, and upper elixir fields (*dantian* 丹田). These are located, respectively, below the navel, in the chest, and in the head, and contain the “furnaces” (*lu* 爐) in which the body’s three forms of energy, “essence” (*jing* 精), “pneuma” (*qi* 氣), and “spirit” (*shen* 神), are progressively refined in complex “fire phases” (*huohou* 火候). What are fused are yin and yang energies that are described in a vast variety of oppositional terms, such as Mercury and Lead, Dragon and Tiger, White Snow and Yellow Sprouts, or Lovely Maid and Baby Boy. The purpose of this process is to first isolate pure yin and pure yang, then to reduce this last (and cosmogonically first) duality to the Pure Yang force that arose in the undivided primordial chaos. Finally even this Oneness is transcended to reach the non-being of the primordial Dao.

In addition to the rich imagery just described, *The Story of Han Xiangzi* also employs the more abstract trigrams of *The Book of Changes* to talk about this procedure. These trigrams consist of combinations of broken (yin) and unbroken (yang) lines. The trigram *kan* 坎 illustrates true yang hidden within yin, while the trigram *li* 離 shows true yin hidden within yang. The exchange of the central lines between these two trigrams yields the pure yang trigram *qian* 乾 and the pure yin trigram *kun* 坤, thus describing the regression to the original duality, which then needs to be overcome in the next reversal by fusing *qian* and *kun*.

As “essence” is transformed into “pneuma,” which again is refined into “spirit” by progressive alchemical transmutations, a “pearl” is formed which, with
proper nourishment, grows into an immortal embryo that will eventually leave behind the body’s husk and join the ranks of immortals. The exact instructions on how to perform this practice were a closely guarded secret and were only supposed to be passed on by masters to carefully chosen disciples whose cultivation enabled them to handle the powerful forces unleashed by this discipline. Although these teachings were written down, the resulting texts were often couched in such esoteric and indirect language that the eager reader still needed the guidance of an accomplished master to put them into practice.\(^{49}\)

Perhaps the most influential text on internal alchemy is Zhang Boduan’s (984–1082) *Chapters on Awakening to Perfection* (*Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇). It is one of the more cryptic presentations of inner alchemy, and has fascinated Daoists through the centuries as they encased it in layer after layer of commentary. One of those captivated by the suggestive poetry of Zhang Boduan’s magnum opus was the author of our novel, Yang Erzeng. The novel’s heavy reliance on this text is quite unmistakable. Many of the poems that open its chapters are drawn verbatim from the *Chapters on Awakening to Perfection*, and the descriptions of alchemical procedures follow the guidance (and often the language) of this key text and its commentaries quite closely.\(^{50}\) The allegorical and technical language used in these passages can be confusing to the uninitiated reader, but should be comprehensible in its general outlines if the above summary of alchemical principles is kept in mind. In the present translation, alchemical terminology is therefore annotated only sparingly. A detailed study of the novel’s alchemical language and thought will be included in a future companion volume to this translation.

One needs to “lay a foundation” (*zhuji* 築基) to be able to conserve the energies needed for alchemical work. Foundational practices include celibacy (to avoid the loss of semen, i.e., primordial yang forces), vegetarian diet, abstention from alcohol, and generally a way of life designed to lessen external distractions, desires, and emotional attachments. Such a reclusive lifestyle is greatly extolled in this novel and contrasted with the emotionally exhausting and insecure life of the average worldlings represented by Han Xiangzi’s stubborn family members. Much attention is given in *The Story of Han Xiangzi* to these foundational requirements, which are more accessible to the average reader than the arcana of alchemical cultivation. The idealized lifestyle of the Daoist practitioners bears a distinct similarity to that of Buddhist clerics and thus it should not come as a surprise that the alchemical discourses are shot through with phrases and images derived from a Chan-Buddhist context. As Chan (Zen) shares the concern of inner alchemy with the transcendence of dualities, mutual fertilization between the two schools
of thought was quite common in the late Imperial period. In *Han Xiangzi*, this affinity manifests itself in citations from the sayings of Chan masters and, perhaps most prominently, in the frequent use of the ox as a stock symbol of the desire-driven ego that needs to be overcome on one’s path toward salvation. Thus *The Story of Han Xiangzi* reflects the religious syncretism that dominated the intellectual scene in the early seventeenth century and is apparent in other novels of the age as well. Where our text differs from others is in its clear Daoist partisanship. Confucianism appears mostly as a worldly entanglement that needs to be overcome, while Buddhism is given a more favorable treatment, but is also explicitly relegated to a subordinate position vis-à-vis Daoism. The syncretism of the novel is a hierarchical one, in which Daoism is given pride of place.

Which school of Daoism are we dealing with in the pages of *Han Xiangzi*? This question is rather difficult to decide, as by the seventeenth century inner alchemy had become the dominant form of self-cultivation in pretty much all forms of Daoism. At the time, the institutionally most visible Daoist movement with a strong focus on inner alchemy was the already mentioned Complete Perfection School. Founded by Wang Zhe (1113–70) in northern China, it syncretically combined Confucian and Chan-Buddhist elements with a core of inner alchemy. It had gained great influence during the Yuan dynasty, when its patriarchs enjoyed imperial patronage, but lost much of its political clout under Ming rule. Still, the itinerant Complete Perfection monk was a common sight in Yang Erzeng’s time and makes several appearances in the story.

However, the author’s treatment of these figures is somewhat ambivalent. In chapter 1, the crane and the musk deer disguise themselves as Complete Perfection monks to hide the fact that they are really just animals. In chapters 13 and 17, Han Xiangzi appears as a monk of this school, but at the same time challenges his audience not to “mistake [him] for an ordinary, mortal monk of the Complete Perfection School, who begs in remote places, eats vegetables, serves demons, and wanders from monastery to monastery.” The image of Complete Perfection Daoism is thus ambiguous. Yang Erzeng endorses many of its tenets, such as inner alchemy and celibacy, and makes heavy use of daoqing songs, a favorite vehicle of Complete Perfection proselytization; at the same time he shows mistrust of the movement’s clergy, who often are not what they seem or what they should be.

In terms of textual references, Yang is clearly leaning toward the so-called “Southern Lineage” (Nanzong 南宗) of inner alchemy. Zhang Boduan’s *Wuzhen pian* is the foundational text for this loose assortment of teachers and teachings, and all of the other alchemical texts referenced in the novel also belong to the corpus of writings associated traditionally with the Southern Lineage. Yang’s involve-
ment in the publication of a key anthology of the Jingming School may provide a unifying element. This particular movement combined a pronounced interest in inner alchemy with an emphasis on ethical conduct. It is perhaps this combination that shaped Yang’s religious perspective in his novel: a focus on the Southern textual lineage of inner alchemy coupled with a rejection of the sexual practices advocated by some in this lineage in favor of Quanzhen-style celibate reclusivism.

THE STORY OF HAN XIANGZI AS A DAOIST NOVEL

Daoism is an ancient religion with a huge corpus of sacred texts. This corpus never stopped growing, as new revelations produced new texts, and new insights and methods required new explications. Periodically efforts were made to gather Daoist texts into authorized collections. Up to the time of Yang Erzeng, several major such efforts had been made. Canonical collections had been published in the eighth, the eleventh, the twelfth, and the thirteenth centuries—only to be lost again. In the Ming dynasty, a more lasting effort was made with the compilation of the Daoist Canon (Daozang 道藏) in the fifteenth century. This massive work in 5318 juan has remained the canonical basis of Daoism to the present day, but was never regarded as the final word in Daoist scripture. New texts were composed on an ongoing basis, while some older texts had been left out of the Canon, with the result that in the following centuries various supplemental collections were published. Yang Erzeng himself was involved in this effort through his editing of the writings of the immortal Xu Xun and his compilation of the Records of Immortal Beauties.

Thus, the canonical collections never served to limit the creative impulse in Daoism, and new scriptures, commentaries, and hagiographies kept being added to the textual basis of Daoism. Beyond religious texts in the narrow sense, Daoist ideas also came to be reflected in the various belletristic genres. For example, Daoist imagery suffused the writings of many Chinese poets, and Daoist themes defined a subset of Yuan dynasty (13th–14th cent.) drama: the already mentioned “delivery plays” (dutuoju 度脱劇). Of course, the Daoist content in such works varied greatly, ranging from mere ornamentation to a thorough dominance by Daoist concerns.

The great contribution of the Ming dynasty to Chinese literature was the vernacular novel, i.e., a long narrative written in the vernacular (rather than the classical) language and divided into chapters. As with earlier literary genres, this new one also came to reflect Daoist elements in the background of its authors and
audience. This impact is most visible in the subgenre defined by the famous writer and historian of literature Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) as “novels of gods and demons” (shenmo xiaoshuo 神魔小說), to which he devoted three chapters of his seminal “Brief History of Chinese Narrative Fiction” (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe 中國小說史略). In fact, for Lu Xun these novels constituted one of two thematic mainstreams in the Ming novel, the other being novels dealing with human relationships (renqing xiaoshuo 人情小說). Later historians of Chinese literature have offered more differentiated typologies of the Ming novel, but in all of these schemata religious novels under various designations have remained a major category.

Not all of these “novels of gods and demons” count as Daoist novels, a term I would like to reserve for those works whose plot serves as a vehicle for Daoist thought, in other words, where the author uses the format of the novel to transmit Daoist truths to the reader. There are many works that focus on the exploits of immortals or battles between gods and demons, but only a few integrate such storylines into a larger scheme of Daoist thought. The most famous example is The Journey to the West (Xiyou ji 西遊記), whose story of the Buddhist monk Tripitaka’s journey to the Buddha’s land serves (on one level of meaning) as an allegory of alchemical cultivation. Clearly Daoist plot structures have also been demonstrated in the novels of Deng Zhimo 鄧志謙, a contemporary of Yang Erzeng.

To be successful, a Daoist novel has to perform a balancing act between a religious message and an entertaining story line. If the latter dominates we end up with a lightly Daoist-flavored adventure story; if the former pushes itself to the foreground, we get pious sermonizing, which is unlikely to attract a wide readership. The Journey to the West is the prime example of a successful balancing act: the processes of inner alchemy are placed at an unobtrusively allegorical level where they do not detract from the riveting narrative of the surface plot. As a result, the novel can be (and has been) read purely for its considerable entertainment value. The deeper message is left to the discerning reader of Daoist inclination.

Yang Erzeng’s Han Xiangzi is certainly not as sophisticated as The Journey to the West in its layering of levels of meaning. While the reader of The Journey to the West can easily forget the novel’s Daoist substructure and just become immersed in the fantasy world of Tripitaka and his companions, in The Story of Han Xiangzi the Daoist structure is always visible on the surface of the plot. Strongly influenced as Yang’s work is by the example of the deliverance plays, cultivation and conversion are the driving forces in the story, and thus quite naturally the Daoist message is made very explicit and unavoidable throughout the
novel—the reader unsympathetic to Daoism is given no escape to another interpretive level. If we use a layered semantic structure as a measure of aesthetic appreciation, *Han Xiangzi* certainly does not play in the same league as *The Journey to the West*.

However, if we compare it to other works in Lu Xun’s “novels of gods and demons” category, it cuts a much more favorable figure. It possesses a coherent and well-organized plot structure and a defining message, and is written in a fluent prose style interspersed with highly original rhymed passages, many of them in the style of popular *daoqing*. The story moves along at a good pace, and a liberal infusion of humor makes its insistence on the futility of worldly pursuits much easier to swallow. A comparison with its closest thematic cousin, the Eight Immortals novel *Journey to the East* (Dongyou ji), clearly shows the relative merits of *Han Xiangzi*. Wu Yuantai’s *Journey to the East* is a loose collection of episodes about the Eight Immortals, as individuals and as a group, that lacks a strongly developed continuous storyline. The episodes are fun to read and a few have caught the popular imagination, but the work as a whole is rather poorly integrated. Yet since the Ming dynasty *Journey to the East* has outdone Yang’s novel in the reading public’s favor. While Lu Xun devotes a section of his “Brief History of Chinese Narrative Fiction” to *Journey to the East*, he does not even mention *The Story of Han Xiangzi*. Why the neglect of the artistically superior of the two novels?

Part of the problem may have been *Han Xiangzi’s* consistent and insistent Daoist message. The story’s obvious religious partisanship may have offended both the relaxed syncretist who believed in the equivalence of China’s three teachings and the staunch Confucian or Buddhist. The reader in search of purely literary enjoyment also may have had problems with a work that tried to harness literature for missionary purposes. One modern historian writing about Ming “novels of gods and strange phenomena” (*shenguai xiaoshuo* 神怪小說) places the *Han Xiangzi* in a large category of “proselytizing works” (*zongjiao xuanchuanpin* 宗教宣傳品), which are said to be of generally low quality. While he admits that “among these novels there are a few that are quite good, such as the *Han Xiangzi quanzhuan*,” ultimately Yang Erzeng’s opus is excluded from further consideration.59

The underlying rationale for the relative neglect of the work becomes visible in the preface to a modern edition. After praising the careful construction and originality of the novel’s plot, the editor goes on to criticize it on two counts: (1) the irregular meters of some of its poetry, and (2) “the preposterous and superstitious nature of some of its contents.”60 In the eyes of modern(ist) critics, *The Story of Han Xiangzi* ultimately fails the litmus test of compatibility with science
and progress by cleaving to a supposedly backward and degenerate Daoism whose superstition had slowed down China’s march into modernity. The even more outrageous “superstitions” in a work such as *Journey to the East* are presumably less of a problem, as they primarily serve ornamental and entertainment purposes and do not merge into a coherent Daoist message. Thus, the seriousness of its religious purpose may continue to affect *Han Xiangzi*’s critical reception today as it did in late Imperial times.

However, there are signs that this attitude may be changing. Yu Deyu 余德余, the editor of yet another modern edition, explicitly recognizes the work’s function of promoting Daoism, yet frames his evaluation in purely literary terms. He credits it with a smoothly flowing style, lively language, a tight structure without repetitiveness, as well as clever use of devices such as wordplay. On the downside, Yu criticizes the author’s overreliance on dialogue and the insufficient exploration of the main characters’ psychology.61 Fang Sheng 方勝 praises the novel’s use of humor, satire, and fantasy. While upholding *The Journey to the West* as the masterpiece and model and pointing out *Han Xiangzi*’s indebtedness to its illustrious predecessor, Fang still sees it as the most outstanding work among all the religious novels inspired by *The Journey to the West*.62 As the modernist master narrative gradually breaks down in Chinese academia, we may be seeing more such balanced assessments of *The Story of Han Xiangzi* on its own merits, and perhaps it will someday gain the place it deserves in the history of Chinese literature.63 That place will certainly not be the one the author of the novel’s preface claims for it—excelling even the four masterworks of the Ming dynasty—but it does belong in a larger group of well-crafted works that have stood the test of time and deserve serious attention.64 It is my hope that the present translation will help this process along.

**On This Translation**

Obviously, translating a seventeenth-century Chinese novel into twenty-first-century English involves more than a word-by-word transposition to transport meaning from the semantic and syntactic structures of one language, culture, and age, into those of a completely different language, culture, and age. To bridge the gulf between source and target languages, there are basically two strategies available: literal translation with heavy annotation, or creative translation involving a lot of paraphrasing. Under the former option, annotation is needed to elucidate phrases that do not by themselves make sense in a literal English rendering. The notes serve to supply the necessary cultural and linguistic context. With the lat-
ter option, such phrases are replaced by close English equivalents, which of course are not direct translations. Obviously, creative translating makes for a smoother read as it does not require the reader to break the flow of the story by continuously having to look up notes. On the other hand, a more literal translation is truer to the original. Of the two target groups of the present translation, the casual reader will prefer the creative option, while the scholar would much rather have the literal one, with all its scholarly apparatus.

I decided to go with what I hope is a reasonable compromise. I aimed to produce a smooth, readable translation, unencumbered by a heavy appendage of scholarly annotation, without however completely shortchanging the serious scholar. Whenever possible I tried to make the translated text stand on its own, i.e., without the crutch of notes. Occasionally this required careful paraphrasing of passages in the original. Annotation has been provided wherever paraphrasing would have required greater departures from the original than my scholarly conscience would brook, or where it would have obscured important semantic elements of the original. The annotation is deliberately limited and does not amount to a running commentary on and analysis of the text. This will be provided in a future companion volume in which I shall address in more depth the textual, intertextual, and religious issues raised by *The Story of Han Xiangzi*, as well as its relation to popular and religious culture in Late Imperial China.

The base text of this translation was a microfiche copy of the edition published by the Jiuru Tang 九如堂 in Hangzhou (preface dated to 1623) and held as a part of the van Gulik collection at Leiden University. I supplemented it with various modern editions. Somewhat confusingly, another Jiuru Tang edition exists that differs from the van Gulik version by adding to it commentaries at the end of each chapter. These commentaries are not reproduced in modern editions of the text and are also omitted in this present translation. However, a few words on their authorship are in order. The commentator is a certain Immortal Guest of Great Peace (Taihe Xianke 泰和仙客) from Wulin 武林 (modern Hangzhou). He is likely the same person as the author of the novel’s preface, who signed his name as the Private Historian of the Mists and Vapors at the Hall of Great Peace (Yanxia Waishi ti yu Taihe Tang 煙霞外史題於泰和堂). I have been unable to discover the identity of this person, but in his preface to *Romance of the Eastern and Western Jin Dynasties* Yang recounts how the original manuscript of the novel was given him by a Master of Great Peace Hall (Taihe Tang Zhuren 泰和堂主人). Apparently someone had submitted the manuscript to the Master of Great Peace Hall, who now wanted Yang’s help in polishing it up for publication. From the description of this Master of Great Peace Hall, we may surmise that he was a friend
of Yang Erzeng’s as well as a fellow book publisher—and was most likely the same person as the author of the preface and commentary to Yang’s *Han Xiangzi*.67

Chinese names and terms are rendered in pinyin romanization. Wherever possible, English equivalents are used, even if they are not exact matches. For example, because none of the measurements in the novel are meant to be exact, for the sake of readability I took liberties such as rendering *sui* as “year” and *li* as “mile.” Age is counted differently in traditional China, so that someone of eighteen *sui* would actually be seventeen years of age. I still render it as “eighteen years.” Similarly, a Chinese *li* is less than a mile—in fact, it is only a bit more than a third of a mile. However, again, as measures of distance are mostly used in the novel with poetic hyperbole, there was no point in exact conversion, and “mile” henceforth is to be read as standing in for the Chinese *li*.

I have also standardized to some extent the names of some characters appearing in the novel. In traditional usage, both men and women used different names in different social contexts. Thus, Han Yu is variously referred to by his style, Tuizhi; his posthumous title, Wengong; or more generally as Lord Han or Master Han. His wife appears as Mme. Dou or Lady Han. To a traditional reader the use of these variant names would have been meaningful as expressing a specific social context. Thus, Han Yu’s posthumous title is used more frequently (though not exclusively) in the novel after the world has come to believe him dead; his wife Mme. Dou is regularly referred to as Lady Han after she has become a widow. Since for the Western reader these issues of nomenclature are rather irrelevant, for ease of reading I have taken the liberty of simplifying the matter somewhat by replacing Lady Han with Mme. Dou and Wengong with Tuizhi or Han Yu throughout. Similar simplifications were made for other names as well.

With these technicalities out of the way, there is nothing more to delay the telling of the story. As the traditional Chinese novelist might have said: “Dear reader, if you do not yet know how the story begins, please turn the page and start reading.”