When Heaven and Earth were split in two, the unified primordial pneuma began to ferment. By virtue of this pneuma, Heaven and Earth appeared; sun and moon emitted their light; the stars shone forth; the thunderbolt reverberated among the clouds; lightning streamed across the sky; plants and trees produced blossoms and fruits. For birds and beasts, this pneuma became their voices and hides; for reptiles and fish, it became their scales, armor, and wriggling movement. Some animals soar and fly, some hunker down and walk, others again glitter in five colors and sing in the harmony of the eight tones. And at the pinnacle of the animal kingdom, we have the turtle who regulates its breathing so skillfully that it lives through the ages, and the crane who so refines its spirit that it soars up to Heaven and flies afar. All of their abilities are due to this pneuma!

Yet while mountains can rise high and rivers can flow forever due to this pneuma, when it is obstructed mountains may collapse and rivers may overflow or dry up. When humans obtain this pneuma, they are born between Heaven and Earth. If they know how to control it, they may rise to the Mysterious Capital of the immortals, to dwell on high adorned with their vermilion insignia. But if they lose control over it, then they are like soldiers who have lost their general, like the fog about to disperse in a rosy dawn—they will become exhausted and wither away, wearily going to their death. What hope have they of achieving eternal life?

Therefore it is said: Without this pneuma, Gong Gong could not have knocked over the mountain holding up Heaven, nor could Nü Gua have mended the sky.
As for those in the world who are called immortals, they wisely obtain the pure beginnings of this pneuma and profoundly understand its marvels. Ceaselessly transforming along with the transformative force of the cosmos, they merge the myriad phenomena into mystic contemplation.3 Ceaselessly drawing their vital forces from the apex of the Dao, they control the six dragons and their spiritual nature is strengthened.4 They perceive that this succession of worlds is a great dream and refute the deep confusion of the unenlightened masses.

Thus they soar above the nine divisions of the realm and still the surging waves in the sea of suffering. Carefree they roam in all the eight directions and extinguish the blazing flames on the mountain of doubts. They ride blue phoenixes above Cinnabar Hill; leaving behind traces divine and marvelous, they transcend the world. They drive chariots pulled by striped unicorns in the Mysterious Garden; their tracks are rare and surpass all human limitations.5 In the morning they travel over the Round Ocean, in the evening they feast in the Fangzhu Palace.6 They abstain from grains and eat immortality mushrooms so that throughout their existence they never age. One may compare them to mountain peaks and towering islands where the trees are forever green, and to gardens and parks where the plants are forever luxuriant and elegantly planted. Investigating the red tablets, they reveal the golden records on the Charts of the Five Marchmounts. Evenly examining the purple documents, they divulge the elixir scriptures in their nine tubes.7

There is an immortal named Xiangzi who hails from Changli. He was a nephew of Han Yu, during the prosperous age of the reign of Emperor Xianzong in the Tang dynasty. He understood the Three Perfections of inner practice, he comprehended the Eight Minerals of alchemy. Outside he treasured the Five Brilliances, inside he preserved the Nine Essences. Cloud-clad he took off his sash and gradually attained the highest ranks of the immortals. Riding the mist with flying duck shoes, he completely realized the rewards of the way of unified perfection.8

His degrees are not noted in the family records, nor are his deeds recorded in the official biographical accounts. Reading in Han Yu’s Collected Works, we find a “Sacrificial Essay for the Twelfth Gentleman,” but Xiangzi is not mentioned.9 Looking up Han Yu’s poetry, we find the line “clouds straddle the mountains of Qin,” but its true meaning is not made clear.10

His 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. Yet their style is disorderly and erroneous, their poems are inept and awkward. If they are sung by boatmen while
rowing their oars, those who listen will forget their fatigue. But if one were to ascend with them the stage of poetic appreciation, the audience would close their eyes in embarrassment.

As for those who nowadays transmit the story of Xiangzi, could there be one who, having a grasp of the marvels of pneuma ingestion, has thereby succeeded in lengthening his years, and who uses the figure of Xiangzi to divulge the general outline of such successful practice? Or, if this Xiangzi really exists, is there one who might use his story to express the wondrous insights of his own mind?

Imitating romances and drawing on local traditions, such a writer compiled this book, telling the story in its general outlines. Having only limited experience, he spent three years pursuing Xiangzi’s traces. He marked and divided his manuscript into chapters and published it as an original work. Its style is extraordinary, being written with a liberal brush and broad-minded intentions. Its contents have both breadth and depth, being composed with a powerful pen in elegant diction.

The author traces Xiangzi’s numinous cultivation back to Mount Pheasant Yoke. After he takes the form of a white crane, he undergoes innumerable transformations until he escapes from the wheel of life and death and his fame reaches the stars. He is compelled to drink the nuptial cup, but still he realizes for all eternity the state of no rebirth. From Gold Sprinkle Bridge to his long wait at the city gate, everywhere he manifests the Dao. Cutting the hibiscus and transforming it into a beautiful woman, everywhere he applies his divine powers.

When you see him beheading a demon with perfected fire, you know that the elixir cauldron can be guarded. When you witness a herdboy recognizing a divine immortal, you see how Daoist songs move people. He changes a stone lion into gold and obtains propitious snow through his prayers, thus showing the vastness of his divine abilities. With a wave of his hand he makes the Dragon Sage come, and with his feet he steps on auspicious clouds, thus displaying the perfection of his magical skills.

Well versed in nourishing his original yang, he is no aimless idler, though he sleeps and snores on the snow-covered ground. Roaming at will in the underworld, he has good cause for escaping from the emotional entanglements of his worldly life. When the Buddha bone is received in the imperial palace, the Tathagatha manifests Xiangzi’s transformative powers. When Han Yu has to cross the river of love on his way into exile, a beautiful woman awakens him from his confusion. Han Xiangzi divines Han Yu’s destiny and exorcizes the violent crocodile of Chaozhou. Having benefited from his ascetic cultivation, Xiangzi goes home once more to complete his return to authentic perfection.
In a dream a marriage proposal is made—but isn’t all life a dream? A fake man exacts revenge—but isn’t everything just lie and rumor leading to disaster? Fortunately, master and servants meet again and Lord Wood gets to lead the way. Happily, mother and daughter-in-law encourage each other and the Metal Mother gets to engage in her amours. A man-bear obeys orders submissively, while a black-hearted musk-deer escapes from his difficulties and becomes a deity.

This book explains the secret scripts of the Perfected Man Zhuowei Mumu; exhaustively explores the illusory realms of humanity and Heaven, in water and on land; explicates the profound purposes of way and virtue, nature and life; and displays extraordinary tidings from the realms of gods and ghosts. In this book the parts and the whole do not conflict with each other, beginning and end do not contradict each other. It has the sternness of Record of the Three Kingdoms and the wondrous transformations of Water Margin, while lacking the cruel satire of The Journey to the West and the indecent license of The Plum in the Golden Vase. It may be said that except for the bequeathed writings of the great historians Sima Qian and Ban Gu, there is nothing that can measure up to this work. Now that the craftsmen have finished carving the printing blocks, and the book is to be published, it shall be praised and achieve fame in the capital.

On the first day of the 6th month in the guihai year of the Tianqi reign period, inscribed by the Private Historian of the Mists and Vapors at the Hall of Great Peace.