PROLOGUE

The Tang dynasty (618-907) stands out as one of the most illustrious periods in the history of Daoism. The Tang saw the integration of the different traditions of Daoism into a complex, hierarchical structure, in which initiation and ordination were linked with the transmission of parts of the Daoist canon. The foundation of this structure was that of the Way of the Celestial Master (Tianshi dao 天師道, also known as Zhengyi 正一, the Orthodox and One), whereas at its pinnacle stood the Shangqing 上清 or Upper Clarity school. It was also during the Tang dynasty that the interest in operational or proto-chemical alchemy reached its peak, while the groundwork of what in later dynasties would become known as “inner alchemy” (neidan 内丹) was being laid.

Among the dynasty’s rulers – who, as is well known, claimed descent from Li Er 李耳, or Laozi 老子 – none supported Daoism more energetically than Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756), the longest-reigning of all Tang sovereigns. By overseeing the compilation of the first veritable Daoist canon, by promoting the state cult of Laozi through a variety of measures, by encouraging the study of the Daoist classics, by granting all Daoist priests and priestesses throughout the realm the status of relatives of the imperial clan, and by surrounding himself with a host of Daoist advisors, Xuanzong’s contribution to the advancement of Daoism indeed exceeded anything seen before.

The present study examines the life and works of Wu Yun 吴筠 (d. 778), without any doubt one of the most remarkable figures of eighth-century Daoism. A scholarly hermit who was later ordained as a Daoist priest and appointed Hanlin Academician in Attendance, Wu Yun was a privileged witness to Xuanzong’s Daoist experiment. Forced to leave the capital area around the time of Xuanzong’s downfall, Wu Yun thereafter lived an exiled life in China’s Southeast, travelling widely among the region’s numerous “renowned mountains,” defending his faith against what he perceived as Buddhism’s inroads and exerting his priestly functions whenever required to.

Over the past few decades, a series of articles – modest in number but generally of more than average quality – have rescued Wu Yun from oblivion. Apart from a growing number of Chinese scholars, we
should think here in particular of Yoshiko Kamitsuaka 神徳淑子, the first to devote an article to Wu Yun’s life and thought; Edward H. Schafer, who studied Wu Yun’s ‘Songs on Pacing the Void’ (buxu ci 步虛詞) and the ‘Wandering Immortal’ poems (youxian shi 遊仙詩); Paul W. Kroll, who translated the ‘Rhapsody on Roosting in the Cliffs’ (Yanqi fu 巖棲賦); and Livia Kohn, who devoted a study to the Discourse on the Mind and the Eyes (Xinmu lun 心目論). Thanks to these scholarly efforts, we got to know Wu Yun as a mystic and as a visionary writer of poems on metaphysical topics. As Wu Yun’s literary compositions, clearly meant to be read by a hyperliterate elite, share much of their language, imagery and professed ideals with the sacred scriptures of Shangqing Daoism, it has become customary to consider Wu Yun one of Upper Clarity’s major representatives, an opinion voiced concisely in the following appreciation by Edward Schafer: “What Wu Yün has done, I believe, is to congeal, refine, and distill the essence of Highest Clarity – that is, of T’ang Taoism – into skilfully constructed verses.” In the course of this book, it will become obvious that our picture of Wu Yun in particular, and, to a certain degree, of Tang dynasty Daoism in general, is in need of further refinement.

My original aim in writing this book, apart from providing a detailed account of Wu Yun’s life and determining Wu Yun’s position in the ideological landscape of the Tang (which I undertake in Part One), was to focus predominantly on the two major themes that permeate Wu Yun’s remaining works. The first is that which we, limited as we are by our Western vocabularies, designate most often as “reclusion,” “eremitism” or “disengagement.” “Recluses,” “hermits” or “dis-engaged persons” – labels we apply to a large and heterogeneous crowd of men who qualified for government service but, for varying reasons, chose to refrain from taking up government employment – abound in Tang dynasty written materials. Obviously, the tension in Late Medieval China between the demand to engage in government service

1 In the context of Wu Yun’s life and works, the term “mystic” is best understood as designating a person who, having experienced the divine, engages upon a quest that will strengthen his bond with the divine, and, in an effort to communicate his experiences to others as well as to remind himself of the goal of his quest, provides a literary outline of the various ways (in this particular case, physical as well as spiritual) supposed to bring one closer to the divine.

and the wish to devote one's life to the pursuance of other goals was such that it prompted countless literati to comment upon or justify their chosen lifestyle. The necessity to defend the ideal of reclusion was certainly felt very strongly by Wu Yun, who devoted a sizeable amount of poems as well as some of his rhapsodies (fu 赋) to it. It is these writings, in particular the poems on 'Investigating the Past' (Langu shi 覽古詩), the 'Rhapsody on the Recluse' (Yiren fu 逸人賦) and the 'Rhapsody on Cleansing the Mind' (Xixin fu 洗心賦), which we examine in Part Two. This will not only enable us to understand the different dimensions of Wu Yun's "philosophy of reclusion," it will also reveal the degree to which reclusion was perceived as an indispensable ingredient of the process of "cultivation and refinement" (xiulian 修煉) which was to elevate the Daoist adept to more exalted modes of being, far beyond this mortal coil.

The second major theme is that of longevity and of the problematic term xian 仙. Recently, it has become somewhat unfashionable to render xian as "immortality," many scholars now preferring to render it as "transcendence." This is due to the emergence of divergent ideas concerning the role of physical death in the refinement of the human persona, as well as about the ultimate goal of the Daoist adept. In Part Three of this book, I hope, among other things, to demonstrate that, in the case of Wu Yun, "immortality," viewed as the consolidation of body and spirit into a stable and enduring unity, is indeed an adequate rendering of xian. Though the attainment of immortality, to Wu Yun as well as to countless other Daoists, did not represent the most complete and total realization of man's inherent potential – it was an intermediate stage en route to perfection (zhen 真) and the spiritual or the divine (shen 神) – Wu Yun treated it profusely in his prose writings, in the Discourse on the Feasibility of Studying Immortality (Shenxian kexue lun 神仙可學論), the Discourse on the Feasibility of Consolidating Body and Spirit (Xingshen kegu lun 形神可固論) as well as in the Mystic Mainstay (Xuangang 玄綱). Here again, as in Part Two, we get to know Wu Yun as an indefatigable defender of ideals, a rhetorician who used the power of the word to convince his contemporaries that the attainment of longevity and immortality was a distinct possibility for all.

3 I have refrained from providing a translation of Wu Yun's series of fifty 'Eulogies on Eminent Scholars' (Gaoshi yong 高士詠) in this study because it shares so much material with Wu Yun's longest fu, the 'Rhapsody on the Recluse,' which has been rendered in its entirety.
those who chose to dedicate their lives to the practising of a wide variety of techniques, among them mental quietude, embryonic respiration, sexual hygiene and sleep deprivation. What Nathan Sivin once said about Ge Hong’s Baopuzi neipian, namely, that it sought “to convince [...] his readers, that immortality is a proper object of study and is attainable,” fully pertains to Wu Yun’s writings.

In the course of my research into Wu Yun’s life, in particular his activities as a priest, I became aware of the existence of numerous elements (cultic or liturgical as well as therapeutic) that linked Wu Yun to the Way of the Celestial Master. When I started to stumble across fragments of liturgical formulae normally used by Zhengyi priests in all of Wu Yun’s prose treatises, I realized that Wu Yun’s traditional characterization as a typical Shangqing representative is far too simplistic to be tenable. A sizeable portion of Part Four is therefore devoted to reviewing the relevant evidence pertaining to Wu Yun’s religious affiliation. As there is so much of Celestial Master Daoism in Wu Yun’s thought and practice, I have labelled our priestly poet “Celestial Master of Upper Clarity.” Inevitably, Part Four is also an exploration of the dissemination of Medieval Celestial Master practice in Southeast China, as well as a challenge to the commonly held view that the Way of the Celestial Master was only passed on among the lower strata of Tang society. I conclude this book with a preliminary inquiry into the diffusion of the bipolar religious profile that was Wu Yun’s, hoping that it will encourage others to delve deeper into the fascinating world of Late Medieval Daoism.

In all of this, it has been my foremost concern to do justice to the complexity of Wu Yun the man as well as to the multilayered nature of his religious profile. In the light of Wu Yun’s literary accomplishments, it seemed logical to me to accord to Wu Yun’s writings the most prominent role, and to attempt, as free as possible of any preconceived images or theories, to grasp what is really being said in them. Rather than using portions of Wu Yun’s works as illustration or corroboration of whatever story it is that I would like to tell, I have chosen to let Wu Yun’s works tell their own story. Moreover, as Wu Yun in his literary compositions may have addressed different audiences, or, more

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specifically, different segments of the literate elite, and as most of Wu’s works demand to be read from start to finish, I have presented these works in their entirety wherever possible, interspersing my translations with elucidations or summaries where necessary. Thus, our chapters 2, 4, 5 and 9 contain full translations of four of Wu Yun’s eight rhapsodies, chapter 3 is built around the series of fourteen poems on ‘Investigating the Past,’ chapters 6 and 7 contain the essence of the Mystic Mainstay, chapter 8 has a translation of the entire Discourse on the Feasibility of Studying Immortality, chapter 9 carries the major part of the Discourse on the Feasibility of Consolidating Body and Spirit, and chapter 10 contains renditions of Wu Yun’s two memorial inscriptions. In this manner, close to two thirds of Wu Yun’s remaining writings have been made accessible in the present volume. And from these writings emerges the multifaceted portrait of Wu Yun the anti-Buddhist, Wu Yun the defender of reclusion, Wu Yun the champion of the quest for immortality and Wu Yun the wandering Celestial Master priest.

That I have given comparatively little consideration to that part of Wu Yun’s oeuvre which we know best – those writings that have been shown to betray the clearest influence of Shangqing mysticism – is entirely a matter of priorities and must in no way be understood as meaning that I judge these writings somehow lacking in interest. On the contrary, even a re-examination of some of Wu Yun’s writings that have already been translated and subjected to serious scrutiny may yield interesting results. In his concluding remarks to his study of Wu Yun’s ‘Wandering Immortal’ poems, for instance, Edward Schafer voiced his frustration at being unable to detect the overarching structure that would give the entire series of 24 poems a deeper sense. Schafer had the impression – and on this point his intuition did not cheat him – that the reshuffling of the individual poems during transmission had destroyed the links that connected them, rendering it impossible to comprehend the ultimate scenario. Had Schafer not based his translation of the ‘Wandering Immortal’ poems on the Quan Tang shi 但唐诗 but on the Daoist canon, he would have obtained quite a different sequence, and he would have come closer to the series’ orginal scenario. Allow me to provide but one concrete example. A set of four poems suggestive of what Schafer described as “a ritual circumambulation of the sublunary world” has obviously been one of the victims of the reorganization of the original sequence. Whereas, in the Quan Tang shi edition, the
eighth poem corresponds to the East, the ninth to the South and the
tenth to the West, the poem that would complete the set by
corresponding to the North is – frustratingly – no. 19. Had Schafer’s
translation been based on the Daoist canon, the impression of a
disturbance of the original order would in this particular case never
have arisen: in the Daozang 道藏, the four poems in question neatly
stand shoulder to shoulder (no. 10: East, no. 11: South, no. 12: West,
and no. 13: North).

A critical comparison of the different schemes of mystical ascent as
found in the ‘Wandering Immortal’ poems, the ‘Songs on Pacing the
Void’ and the hitherto unstudied ‘Rhapsody on the Ascent to
Perfection’ (Dengzhen fu 登真賦), which is highly akin in language
and imagery to the ‘Songs on Pacing the Void,’ combined with a more
profound analysis of the relevant data introduced in the pages to come,
demands to be undertaken. Even if such an investigation were not to
yield a single, consistent scenario transcending the boundaries of the
individual works, it would nonetheless considerably enrich our
knowledge of Tang dynasty Daoist mysticism. As such an endeavour
would easily fill another booklength study, it must fall outside the scope
of the present – already rather bulky – volume.

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The groundwork for this book was laid during a three-year period
(1997-2000) as postdoctoral researcher at Leiden University’s
Sinological Institute, in charge of the Dutch Organization for Scientific
Research (NWO). I hereby wish to express my gratitude once more for
their support. During these years, early versions of parts of the chapters
One and Three of the present book were published in Sanjiao wenxian:
Matériaux pour l’étude de la religion chinoise 2 (1998), T’ang Studies
17 (1999), and De Meyer, J. & Engelfriet, P. (eds.), Linked Faiths.
Essays on Chinese Religions & Traditional Culture in Honour of

The bulk of the book, however, was written between 2000 and 2004,
a period largely spent outside of the academic world. Dividing my time
between literary translations, childcare, household chores and Wu Yun,
I worked in relative isolation, without institutional affiliation and at
considerable distance from a decent sinological library. Under the
circumstances, occasions to acquaint myself with the most recent
secondary literature were few. This is one of the shortcomings of this study, for which I beg the reader’s lenience.

For their help, advice, comments or encouragement, I extend heartfelt thanks to Kristofer Schipper, Wilt Idema, Peter Engelfriet, Achim Mittag, Paul W. Kroll, Vincent Goossaert, Franciscus Verellen, Wang Ka, Barend ter Haar and Oliver Moore. I dedicate this volume to my wife, Mieke, for her unflagging support, and to my children, Anton, Elena and Eugénie, for being there.

Lemberge, December 2005