The Spontaneous Body

Silently standing in perennial mist and tropical verdure, Mt Luofu was where the ancient Daoist Ge Hong spent his final years experimenting on an alchemical elixir that would ultimately grant him immortality. Legend had it that he succeeded. When Su Shi – aged, tired and disillusioned – was banished to Huizhou, he interpreted the destination of his journey as a sign of fate’s urging his final commitment to the arcane science.

This book’s last chapter is about the last chapter of Su Shi’s life: his escape from, and ultimate reconciliation with, death. In Su Shi’s conceptual world, immortals were real or possibly real beings. An immortal’s body was the fully spontaneous body, free from anxiety, disease and even the restrictions of a concrete material form. If the exoteric pursuit of spontaneity ended with the model of Tao Qian, the esoteric pursuit of spontaneity ended with that of Ge Hong.

Mainstream Chinese literature is generally reluctant to discuss Su Shi’s Daoist devotion in the last stage of his life, wary of it being ‘superstitious’. In English literature, Ronald Egan has given this issue some well-balanced consideration. However, Egan did not pay heed to the periodisation in Su Shi’s commitment to alchemical practices, the techniques that he employed, or the context of alchemical beliefs and practices handed down through history. Without a careful examination of such beliefs and practices, an important aspect of Su Shi’s life, as well as many of his literary works (especially those written

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1 See Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 72.1911–3.
ten in Huizhou), is liable to be poorly understood. This chapter is a preliminary attempt to correct the academic oversight.

As I argue, Su Shi’s pursuit of immortality was part of his efforts to explore the unknown and to fathom his fate. It was also consistent with his pursuit of spontaneity in art and in life. An ‘immortal’ (\textit{xian}) not only lives for an extremely long time, he also lives in complete spiritual and physical freedom. Paradoxically, in the pursuit of such freedom, every stage requires ardent ritual practice in induced meditation. Regardless of whether immortality is fate or achieved, even those whose chance of immortality is written require dedicated practice. Those less lucky may achieve extreme longevity through meticulous care. Yet, such efforts are not to ‘interfere’ with one’s fate. To be truly spontaneous, when death comes, one should readily resign to one’s fate without further ado. The pursuit of immortality reveals a dynamic structure of practice and resignation, resulting in the kind of spontaneity which is provisional and conditioned by human imperfection.

This chapter first gives a chronological account of Su Shi’s Daoist devotion and examines the various techniques he used, including laboratory and physiological alchemy. Then it discusses the various literary precursors that he chose to follow, each giving a conflicting view of death and immortality. An esoteric discourse on ‘the Dragon and the Tiger’ practice that he wrote in Huizhou is carefully analysed; and his building of a house on the White Crane Peak is seen as the culmination of his commitment to the pursuit of immortality. However, his further exile to Hainan falsified his reading of destiny, resulting in his resolution to the active immersion in the transience, and his final resignation to fate.

The Amateur Alchemist before Mt Luofu

Among Song literati, Daoist practice in varying degrees of dedication was common. Even though the Zhao imperial house of the Song did not promote themselves as the descendants of Laozi, like the Li house of the Tang did, several emperors were devoted adepts, under whose patronage the Daoist scriptures

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4 The Chinese notion of \textit{xian} does not necessarily imply they never die. They may live for a few hundred years or achieve seeming immortality – that is, living as long as Heaven and Earth exist. Here, the term ‘immortal’ is used as an apologetic counterpart for \textit{xian}, as becoming immortal is the practitioner’s ultimate goal (implied in the alternative term for the Daoist art: \textit{busi zhishu} 不死之術, or ‘the technique of undying’).