《道教研究學報：宗教、歷史與社會》第八期（2016）
*Daoism: Religion, History and Society*, No. 8 (2016), 7–33

# Sisters of the Blood: The Lives behind the Xie Ziran Biography*

Stephen R. Bokenkamp

**Abstract**

Over the preceding decade, the story of Xie Ziran's "ascent" has drawn much scholarly attention. Scholars have, for the most part, employed historical methods to study the tale, intending to elucidate the origins, psychologies, and socio-cultural backgrounds of Xie Ziran and her fellow practitioners. Basing myself on a thorough recognition of the fictionality of the Xie Ziran story, I attempt here a literary analysis that I hope will show the main features of the image of Daoist priestesses created in this myth. These images may have been promulgated by the priestesses themselves, but they were also constructed by the literati officials who either praised

---

**Stephen R. Bokenkamp** (Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley, 1986) specializes in the study of medieval Chinese Daoism, with a special emphasis on its literatures and its relations with Buddhism. He is author of *Early Daoist Scriptures* and *Ancestors and Anxiety* as well as over thirty-five articles and book chapters on Daoism and literature. Among his awards are the Guggenheim Award for the Translation of a medieval Daoist text and a National Endowment for the Humanities Translation grants. In addition to his position at Arizona State, he has taught at Indiana University, Stanford University, and short courses for graduate students at Princeton and Fudan Universities. He was also part of the National 985 project at the Institute of Religious Studies, Sichuan University during 2006–2013.

* This work is dedicated to Kristofer M. Schipper, whose lively 1965 work *L'Empereur Wou des Han dans la legend Taoïste: Han Wou-ti nei-tchoan*, assigned by Edward Schafer in preparation for my first class on Daoism, first sparked my interest in the religion. I would like to thank Professors Franciscus Verellen and Vincent Goosaert for including me in this effort and am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments. Their contributions are now invisible and any remaining apparent errors are my own.

or criticized them. Whatever their origins, such constructed images should not be dismissed by scholars as "deceptive creations." In modern terms, they are advertisements for a group of women Daoist practitioners from the Belvedere of Jade Asterism in the Tang capital Chang'an who practiced conversion, preaching, ritual services, and alchemy, and also had close relations with the women of the inner palace.

**Keywords:** blood, Daoist women, Tang alchemy, Han Ziming, Tian Yuansu

It is understandable, this wish to study the lives of premodern Daoists. We have, of course, hagiography, but how exemplary are these of the lives of actual Daoists? They read more as models for emulation, adoration, or justification than as narratives about the lives of actual people. What is left to us beyond these texts are mute implements, cold inscribed stone, and enticing scriptures. Yet these remains are everywhere marked with intimacy. Implements, it goes without saying, gesture toward the people who used them. In the same way, even the most formulaic of ritual pronouncements lead us to wonder about those who wrote and used them. In reading the ritual directions, manuals of personal practice, and codes of conduct left to us in the Daozang, we are everywhere confronted, albeit in shadowy, even imaginary form, with bodies bending, floating, gesturing, and even seeming to fly. But, as engaging as all this might be, there is still the historical imperative. We wish to know for certain when our texts were written, by whom, and how precisely they were practiced. The avalanche of studies on dating questions, particularly for texts from the period from the Han to the Tang, attests to both our desire to know and to the difficulty of doing so.[1]

Accurate attribution of Daoist texts is in fact only possible in a rare number of cases. We know the name Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477) and have a few intimate glimpses into his practice.[2] But we know far too little and are even unsure of the extent to which he edited the scriptures of the Lingbao corpus. Different dating schemes abound, and some still claim that Lu Xiujing himself was involved in the same enterprise as are we modern scholars when he marked some Lingbao scriptures as "old" 舊 and others as "new" 新.[3]

---

1 The most reliable source for dating Daoist texts is Kristofer M. Schipper and Franciscus Verellen. *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). But new opinions appear daily.

2 For an excellent example, see Franciscus Verellen "Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477) on Daoist Practice" in the present volume.

3 See Stephen R. Bokenkamp "Scriptures Old and New: Lu Xiujing and Mastery," in Paul Katz 康豹and Liu Shufen 劉淑芬, eds., *Di sijie guoji Hanxue huiyi lunwen ji: xinyang, shijian yu wenhua tiaoshi* 第四屆國際漢學會議論文集——信仰、實踐與文化調適 [Essays from the International Conference on Chinese Studies, Religions Section] (Taipei, Academia Sinica Institute of History and Philology, 2013), 449–74.

Perhaps aware of Lu's claims to editorial mastery and the scant evidence of it, Tao Hongjing provided a much more detailed record of his work on the Shangqing corpus in his *Dengzhen yinjue* and in the *Zhen'gao*.[4] Still, the number of scriptures is great and those we can accurately date, exceedingly small. The lives we can glimpse through these writings is vanishingly small.

So, if we are not able to recover much on the quotidian lives of authors and compilers of early Daoist scripture—those who wrote—how are we to reconstruct the lives of those who practiced? The figures who appear in Daoist scripture seem to represent, almost without exception, the hagiographies mentioned above. To give but one example, the Lingbao scriptures contain a closely detailed account of the otherwise unknown Yao Fajie 樂法戒 and his family, but, as Zűrcher noticed long ago, this turns out to be a Daoist retelling of the *Viśvantara-jātaka*, the popular tale of the Buddha's penultimate life.[5] There was no Yao Fajie and his life story cannot even stand as typical of the contemporary Daoist practitioner. It is entirely prescriptive and not descriptive at all.

In this paper, I want to explore another method of recovering the lives of practicing Daoists during the pre-Song period, for which evidence is most scarce. I will look in particular at the lives of a group of remarkable women who practiced in the capital of Chang'an in the early ninth century and who took as their models both Wei Huacun 魏華存 and Xie Ziran 謝自然 (d. 794). I will detail my approach to the disparate materials relating to the lives of these women in a moment.

First, I think that we should get the blood out of the way at the outset. My title is derivative and so some of you may think that I intend a thick description of the image of blood in Tang women's

---

[4] Consult Michel Strickmann, "The Mao Shan Revelations: Taoism and the Aristocracy." *T'oung-Pao* 63 (1977), 1–64.

[5] See Erik Zűrcher, "Buddhist Influence on Early Taoism: A Survey of Scriptural Evidence," *T'oung Pao* 66 (1980), 102–4 and, for a comparison with early Buddhist translations of the tale, Stephen R. Bokenkamp, "The *Vessantara-jātaka* in Buddhist and Daoist Translation," in Benjamin Penny, ed., *Taoism in History: Essays in Honour of Professor Liu Ts'un-yan* (London: Routledge, 2006), 56–73.

religious lives on the order of the insightful scholarship of Caroline Walker-Bynum on medieval Christian women. Such a study might be possible, but I do not intend to attempt it here. I will, however, readily acknowledge that I have learned much from her work. In the conclusion of her book *Wonderful Blood*, Bynum makes an impassioned plea for studying religions in their own right, rather than explaining their claims and contradictions in terms of external factors such as "social control, war, fear of the other" and so on.[6]

I want to do that as well, though I suspect that our ideas of just what religion entails might differ somewhat. Over the past twenty years or so, I have been following closely the work of my former colleague at Indiana University, Robert Campany, who has developed some novel approaches to the study of medieval Chinese religion.[7] Campany's methodological astuteness, I have found, is the perfect counterbalance to my philological inclinations. So, without attempting to justify them or account for their origins, let me state a few of the operating assumptions I have derived from Campany's work:

(1) As scholars, we need to be careful about language. In particular, we should be aware of the metaphors we use to understand religious phenomena, for each of these reveals some things with particular clarity only at the cost of masking other things.
(2) Although we commonly imagine them to be such, religions are not neatly bounded entities, but complex aggregations of plural phenomena. This is especially true of Chinese religions. It is thus not the project of the scholar to decide just which social or intellectual features belong in which particular

---

[6] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[7] See, in particular, Robert Ford Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)," *History of Religions* 42.4 (May 2003), 287–319; "The Meanings of Cuisines of Transcendence in Late Classical and Early Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* 91 (2005), 126–82; and *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

packing crate that we can label Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucianism.

(3) Religious persons do often employ such labeling tactics, but when they do so it is always a polemical move, meant to distinguish their group and ways of doing things from other options in their society. The metaphors they use to describe their thoughts and actions highlight some aspects and hide others in ways that consciously or unconsciously reveal such contestations.

(4) In the lives of individuals, religions are employed as a toolkit or repertoire of social actions and representations that can be deployed in certain situations. Individuals variously avail themselves of aspects of this repertoire, sometimes even in self-contradictory ways, to meet specific life events. This deployment is often represented by them in the form of narrative.

Now, if this account of Chinese religion is valid, the "lives" we might recover from religious writing will *never* map onto the life of any individual, past or present. That is to say, each Daoist life with which we are presented is constructed from the possible options available to that person or his/her biographer. Further, each life is enacted in a way consciously designed to set it in opposition, contestation, or accord with other options available at the time. Tao Hongjing, for instance, portrays himself as someone acutely aware of the Daoist origins of Buddhism as it was practiced in the true homeland of the religion, the isles of Fangzhu in the eastern seas off the coast of China. His "buddho-daoist belief system," I contend, was an ideological defense erected against the imperial desire to eradicate the Daoist religion.[8] To take it as some inherently personal, permanent, and unchanging part of Tao's mental landscape would thus be mistaken.

All of this would be bad news were I reading biography, but promises better results when one is dealing, as I am here, with

[8] For initial research in this direction, see Stephen R. Bokenkamp, "Research Note: Buddhism in the Writings of Tao Hongjing," *Daoism: Religion, History, and Society* 6 (2014), 247–68.

scattered and contradictory sources. In this paper, I plan to isolate the specifically Daoist repertoires of three women of the late eighth and early ninth century as presented by and for them in texts that have come down to us. As I will argue below, these texts differ widely in nature. We will look at a hagiography, two poems criticizing the women, poems in support of them, and uniformly positive grave biographies 墓誌銘. When identical portrayals arise from such disparate sources, I will argue, we can be fairly certain that these aspects of the lives of these women were created by or for them. In other words, while we cannot reconstruct complete lives, we can gain knowledge of how these specific individuals portrayed themselves, or were portrayed, as Daoist women of their time and place. These portrayals were both models of and models for the ways actual Daoist women lived their lives.

Several times now I have shied away from claiming full agency for these particular women. Were they then simply pawns whose images were shaped by the men around them? I doubt it. Rather, I think that, like all of us, the social personae and actions of these female Daoists were shaped by social response. The results of their self-fashioning, were we able to distinguish it, would differ little from the images made by others. This is because humans tend to adopt freely, and often subconsciously, those actions and attitudes for which they are rewarded by social goods—including attention, acclaim, emulation, etc.—as much as by material reward.[9]

I am drawn to this study by several factors. First, the lives of medieval Daoists and particularly Daoist women are notoriously difficult to recover. I want to see if our methodology can reveal more than what I have come to think of as "just the facts, sir" school of inquiry.[10] Analyzing the repertoires of these women allows

[9] For reflections on how this might work, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). While there is much of value in this book, I don't believe that it is ever true that a piece of writing can function fully as a personal expression "sent forth to perform the bidding of its master" (p. 142). Rather, the poem or other writing is always fashioned in dialectical collusion with the culture and society in which it is composed.

[10] There are many contemporary articles that could be brought into evidence. Here are some of the better ones: Li Pei 李裴, in a well-researched article that teases

(*Continue on next page*)

me to use writings critical of them as well as those supporting their actions. Further, this approach highlights the importance of fantastical elements in the representations of Daoist practice that are often bracketed off by modern researchers for being historically implausible. Second, as I read through the materials I will present, I noticed that all three women seem to have practiced operative alchemy—and two of them died because of it. In addition, two of the women came to occupy a temple for Daoist women in the imperial palace. This period of the mid-late Tang was the heyday of alchemical practice, another secretive aspect of Daoism notoriously difficult to study. In fact, three successive emperors died of elixir ingestion, Li Chun (唐憲宗, 李純, 805–820), Li Heng (唐穆宗, Li Heng 李恆, 820–824), and Li Zhan (唐敬宗, Li Zhan 李湛, 824–826).[11] Could the allure of these alchemically-altered women in the palace be part of the impetus that led these young rulers to ignore what they knew of the dangers of elixir ingestion? The question is unanswerable, but we might be able to form interesting hypotheses.

The three women I will deal with are, first, Xie Ziran 謝自然, the daughter of a minor official from Nanchong 南充, some 200 kilometers east of Chengdu, Sichuan.[12] She "ascended" in 794 at

---

(Note 10—*Continued*)

out the roles of the populace, officials, the throne, and Daoist hagiographers in constructing tales of the ascent of female Daoists, including Xie Ziran, limits herself to supporters. In fact, those who oppose Daoism inadvertently also attest to its popularity. (See Li Pei, "Minjian yu guanfang zhengzhi yu zongjiao—yi Tandai nüzhen bairi shengxian xianxiang wei zhongxin de kaocha 民間與官方、政治與宗教——以唐代女真白日升仙現象為中心的考察," *Sichuan daxue xuebao* 四川大學學報 4 (2011), 25–29.) He Haiyan's 何海燕 "Tangdai nüzhen Xie Ziran kao 唐代女真謝自然考" and the supplement by the editor Pi Ren 丕仁 (*Daojiao yanjiu* 道教研究 2 (2006), 37–40), while providing much helpful data, are obsessively concerned with discovering what might actually have happened.

[11] See Qing Xitai 卿希泰, ed. *Zhongguo daojiao shi* 中國道教史 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 1994), v. 2, 353–60, and Sun Changwu 孫昌武, *Daojiao yu Tangdai wenxue* 道教與唐代文學 (Beijing: Renmin, 2001), 56–61.

[12] In addition to those works mentioned in note #8, the contemporary works I have consulted on Xie Ziran are Li Guanghui 李光輝, "Xie Ziran bairi feisheng ji qi yingxiang 謝自然「白日飛昇」及其影響," *Daojiao yanjiu* 道教研究 2 (2003), 28–32; Zhao Juanning 趙娟寧, *Tangdai funü yu daojiao* 唐代婦女與道教 (M.A. thesis: Shanxi shifandaxue 陝西師範大學, 2006); Feng He 馮鶴, "Tangdai nüguanre de xianxiang qianxi 唐代女冠熱的現象淺析," *Zhongguo daojiao* 中國道教2 (2008), 32–34; Jiao Jie 焦杰, "Tangdai daojiao nü xintu de zongjiao

(*Continue on next page*)

approximately 28 years of age. The most famous of the three women, there are three poems about her written by contemporaries that have survived, including one by the famous Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824).[13] More importantly, she was the subject of biographies supposedly written by the Regional Commanders 刺史 Li Jian 李堅 and Wei Gongsu 韋公肅.[14] Li Jian also records that he memorialized the emperor, who sent a commemorative announcement of her apotheosis.[15] I will draw on the contemporary poems as well as on the biography recorded in the *Taiping guangji* and likely written by Li Jian. As we will see, he was quite familiar with Xie and preserves some of the revelations granted her by the Queen Mother of the West.

The second woman is Han Ziming 韓自明, who died in 831 at the advanced age (at least for these women) of 68. She was the daughter of Han Yi 韓佾, the newly appointed Commander 刺史 of

---

(Note 12—*Continued*)
huodong jiqi shenghuo: yi muzhi cailiao wei zhongxin 唐代道教女信徒的宗教活動及其生活：以墓誌材料為中心," *Shaanxi Shifan daxue xuebao* 陝西師範大學學報 42.2 (2013), 124–29; and Yang Lirong 楊麗容 and Wang Ting 王斑, "Ziran pifa: Tangdai nüguan Xie Ziran kaosuo 自然披髮——唐代女冠謝自然考索," *Guizhou daxue xuebao* 貴州大學學報 30.2 (2012), 135–42.

13 The poems are discussed below.

14 Li Jian's biography is mentioned in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 66.413. It was erected on Gold Font Mountain, where Xie Ziran practiced and was entitled the "Stele on the Ritual Platform of Gold Font 金泉道場碑." *Xin Tangshu* 59.1524 titles this work the *Biography of the Perfected of the Eastern Extremity* 東極真人傳 in one scroll. Wei Gongsu's biography, "Account of the Perfected Residence in the Caverns of Gold Font金泉洞仙居述, appeared on a stele erected in 841 on the site of Xie Ziran's ascent. See the *Yudi jisheng* 輿地紀勝, 154.30a; *Baoke leibian* 寶刻類編 5.30a. I will refer to the surviving *Taiping guangji* biography of Xie Ziran as simply "the *Biography*."

15 This account is drawn from the *Biography*. Han Yu portrays the event rather differently. He writes that after Xie Ziran's ascension "The village functionaries reported the matter / And the Prefect sighed in amazement. / He sent out chariots and ordered his officials, / But the commoners strove to get there first." 里胥上其事，郡守驚且嘆，驅車領官吏，氓俗爭相先。This account accords with the theme of Han Yu's poem that all of this Xie Ziran business is the result of a consortium of commoners. I will have more to say on this subject below. But Li Jian seems to have actually memorialized the Dezong emperor Li Kuo 李适 (r. 742–805). Excerpts from the emperor's responses survive. See Long Xianzhao 龍顯昭 et al., eds., *Bashu daojiao beiwen jicheng* 巴蜀道教碑文集成 (Chengdu: Sichuan Daxue, 1997), 34. Unlike many contemporaries and perhaps his own descendants, Li Kuo seems uninterested in the details of Xie's ascension. He takes the miracle as a sign of divine approbation of good government and a sign of grace related to the imperial ancestor Laozi.

Guozhou with its administrative seat in the vicinity of present-day Nanchong, Sichuan. After the death of her husband, Ziming left the home to become a Daoist with Xie Ziran.[16] Around 827, she was called into the imperial presence. She died in the women's Daoist abbey, the 玉晨觀, roughly "Belvedere of Jade Asterisms." The Yuchen guan is of special interest, in that it was established, at a date unknown, to minister to the Daoist religious needs of palace women.[17] Apparently men could attend only on Daoist holy days when special rites were conducted. We have, for this purpose, a number of texts written by Hanlin Academicians for inclusion in these rituals. Among them is one by the famous Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846).[18]

For Han Ziming, we have two bits of documentary evidence: A poem belittling her written by the staunch opponent of organized Daoism and Buddhism, Han Yu and a 墓誌銘 or "mortuary biography" discovered in modern times and entitled "A Rhymed

---

[16] The *Biography* records that her father had Han Ziming take Xie Ziran as "master" 俾即使女自明師事焉. But the mortuary biography of Han Ziming states that 乃於嚴君里所得同志女謝自然，於民閭而友之. This is not entirely clear, but it is apparent that Han Ziming and Xie Ziran were "companions" in religion under the same Master. I translate: "Then [she] met the co-religionist Xie Ziran at Lord Yan Village and befriended her at a local village." Since both have the character *zi* 自 in their names, it is likely that the tradition they had joined used generational names. While no one to my knowledge has yet gathered information on this naming practice during the Tang, this would be yet another indication that they were of the same generation with a common Master.

[17] See Fan Bo 樊波, "Tang Daminggong Yuchenguan kao 唐大明宮玉晨觀考, in Yan Yaozhong 嚴耀中, ed., *Tangdai guojia yu diyu shehui yanjiu* 唐代國家與地域社會研究 (Shanghai: Guji, 2008), 417–24, for some information on the Abbey. An inadvertently humorous part of this effort is the author's attempt to prove that Han Ziming was a woman. First proof: she married a man and gave birth to a son. Second proof . . . (422).

[18] Bo Juyi's 白居易 (翰林學士 807–811), 上元日談道文 begins "In a timely fashion, the season has reached Upper Prime and we, the female Daoists ___, on behalf of the August Emperor, burn incense and practice the Dao, respectfully cultivating merit [for him]" 今以時因獻歲，節及上元，女道士某等奉為皇帝焚香行道，敬修功德. Three similar texts, mentioning either "female Daoists" or the Belvedere of Jade Asterisms survive from Feng Ao 封敖 (翰林學士 842–845), 慶陽節玉晨觀歎道文, 憲宗忌日玉晨觀歎道文, 立春日玉晨觀歎道文 (See *Quan Tangwen* 728:15a–16) and two from Dugu Lin 獨孤霖 (翰林學士 862–865), 七月十一日玉晨觀別修功德歎道文, 七月十一日玉晨觀別修功德歎道文 (See *Wenyuan yinghua*, 472:9b).

Inscription on the Former Tang Transcendent Officer of Great Virtue, Granted the Purple [Sash], the Ritual Master Three Luminescences of Upper Clarity Rank [who resided in] the Belvedere of Jade Asterisms in the Interior [Women's Quarters of the Palace], with Preface" 唐故內玉晨觀上清大洞三景法師賜紫大德仙官銘並序.[19] For obvious reasons, I will call this "the Han Ziming mortuary biography."

The third woman is Tian Yuansu 田元素, another priestess of the Belvedere of Jade Asterisms. She died in 829 at the age of 31. The only piece of information on her life is another mortuary biography with a title equally as ponderous as that given to Han Ziming's.[20] This biography, however, was written by a woman, Song Ruoxian 宋若憲, who signs herself as 母內學士. This is a title that does not seem to occur in standard sources. I translate roughly: "Scholar of the Inner Palace of the Empress Dowager." Song Ruoxian belonged to a very different lineage of women who resided within the palace. She and her four sisters, descendants of the famous early Tang statesman and poet Song Zhiwen 宋之問 (656–

[19] Han Ziming's mortuary biography was signed by the Zhao Chengliang趙承亮, Military Guardian of Chang'an County長安縣. He was the son of Zhao Jing, 趙憬 (*Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 138.3780); also see Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818), "Zhao gong mudao bei 趙公墓道碑," in the *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華, 886.3b. The mortuary biography is transcribed in the *Tangdai muzhi huibian xuji* 唐代墓誌彙編續集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2011), 大和 033.I will refer to it as "the Han Ziming biography." The poem by Han Yu 韓愈 is "Huashan nü 華山女" (*Quan Tangshi*, 341.3823). Han Ziming's name is not mentioned in the poem, so it is possible that it was written about yet another famous Daoist woman preacher. This is highly unlikely, though. The details of the poem fit too well with what we know of Han Ziming's life from her mortuary biography, and we know that Han Yu wrote a poem criticizing another member of this group, Xie Ziran. I have consulted the translation by Burton Watson of Han Yü's poem. See Victor H. Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 222–24.

[20] The mortuary biography is titled "Rhymed Inscription for the Mysterious Chamber of Former Ritual Master Tian, a Perfected of the Green Thearch of the Eastern Marchmount and Disciple of the Thrice[eight] Effulgences of the Great Cavern [Scripture of] Shangqing, of the Belvedere of Jade Asterisms within the Palace of Great Brightness of the Tang, together with a preface." 唐大明宮玉晨觀故上清太洞三景弟子東嶽青帝真人田法師玄室銘並序. It is transcribed in *Sui Tang Wudai muzhi huibian* 隋唐五代墓誌彙編 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji, 2009), v. 4, 大和 019. From now on I will refer to this as "the Master Tian inscription."

712), served a succession of imperial families as scribes and instructors.[21] (The historians record that the sisters also had a brother, but he was "stupid, unteachable, and ended his life as a commoner.") The sisters also wrote a *Women's Analects* recording the words and deeds of famous women in imitation of the *Analects* account of Confucius and his disciples.[22] Thus, there were, in the inner chambers of the Palace, both a lineage of Confucian women and a lineage of Daoist women. As we see from this mortuary biography, they supported one another.

For this essay, I have isolated three aspects of the repertoires created by and for these women that I have found central to the writings about them: their appearance, their facility with language, and their close associations with other women. None of these aspects is particularly striking, but the way they play out in the accounts is.

We begin with appearance. All three women are, as one would have expected, described as beautiful. They were also recognized as mysteriously striking in one way or another, a feature we often see in the biographies of Daoists. Even the ability to detect these inner spiritual qualities was in itself a sign of religious mastery. This complex of ideas is related to the ancient technologies for recognizing special individuals through their appearance, called 相法 or "the art of physiognomizing," an art that signaled the insight of the observer as much as the qualities of the observed.[23] For instance, the emperor Li Chun 李純 is said to have recognized the

---

[21] A mortuary biography for the Second sister, Song Ruozhao 宋若昭, has recently been unearthed. See Zhao Liguang 趙力光 and Wang Qingwei 王慶衛, "Xinxian Tangdai neixueshi shanggong Song Ruozhao muzhi kaoshi 新見唐代內學士尚宮宋若昭墓誌考釋," *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物 5 (2014), 102–8. I am grateful to Professor Amy McNair for pointing out this article.

[22] *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書, "Houfei xia后妃下," 90.3508–9. For a translation of the *Nü lunyu*, see Robin R. Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 327–40.

[23] On the art of physiognomy, or telling the character of a person through facial features and other physical signs, see Catherine Despeux, "Physiognomie" in Marc Kalinowski, ed., *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2003), 513–55.

distinctiveness of Tian Yuansu after a single glance [憲]宗一見，甚器異之.[24]

But the specific contexts in which these women are observed often points to something else–the potencies hidden in their outwardly soft bodies. Xie Ziran, who by that time had begun to subsist entirely on *qi* supplemented by a single cypress leaf per day, was twice locked away for periods of over a month by men who doubted her abilities: first by the Regional Commander Han Yi 韓佾, who later allowed his daughter Han Ziming to pursue the Dao with her, and then by her own father. Each time she emerged looking more supple 宛然 and healthy than before in both "complexion and body" 膚體.[25] Even Han Yu, for whom the attractive feminine appearance of Xie Ziran is a sign of her youthful ignorance, notes the importance of an alluring and distinctive countenance. In his poem on Han Ziming he describes the young girl's first preparations for preaching: "She washes off her makeup, wipes her face and dons crown and cape; her throat white, cheeks red, and long eyebrows glistening black" 洗妝拭面著冠帔，白咽紅頰長眉青. What is presented as notable here is her beauty despite *lack* of artificial adornment.

The descriptions are even more striking when the results of drug ingestion yield improvements in appearance, as it does in both the cases of Xie Ziran and Tian Yuansu. At this point, it is well to note that none of the texts we have to review here mention specifically that these women are ingesting elixirs. Xie Ziran herself is given drugs by celestial beings that are sometimes described quite carefully.[26] These references likely represent products of the alchemical furnace. This impression is heightened due to the fact that the one drug we know Xie to have taken for certain, *zaojia* 皂莢, seeds from the soap bean tree, was not only an emetic (the use to which Xie first put it) but also stabilized alchemical

[24] Master Tian Inscription.
[25] *Xie Ziran Biography*.
[26] The most detailed of these is the drug given Xie after the Queen Mother's first visit. It is described as "yellowish white in color and possessing a sweet taste" 色黃白，味甘.

compounds.[27]

For Tian Yuansu, however, we have only cover terms. The problem with these terms is that they can stand either for *qi* ingestion or for elixir consumption. The phrase "dine on auroras and swallow liquids" 餐霞咽液, for instance, is composed of terms commonly used in breath recycling. But the alchemist Zhang Jiugai 張九垓 (fl. 720–ca.780) often explains how elixir products produce "liquids" that must be swallowed.[28] "Auroras" is a more common descriptive term for the appearance of elixir products.[29] Lu Lun 盧綸 (739–799) even used it in his poem on Xie Ziran, writing "Singing this [poem] I wish to cup in my hands the golden liquid 歌此因思捧金液."[30] Finally, three of the four contemporary poets who wrote about Xie Ziran, describing their visits to her place of practice, described alchemical furnaces on the site:

> The blue stream does not adjoin fishers' or woodcutters' paths; her cinnabar well now only bestows winds from the grasses and trees 青溪不接漁樵路，丹井唯傳草木風 (Lu Lun).
>
> Water flows through cracks in her elixir furnace; / Clouds rise from her sealed grass hall 水流丹竈缺，雲起草堂關. (Fan Chuanzheng 范傳正, fl. 794)[31]
>
> Clouds cover the rose-gem ritual platform in its purity; / Mosses grow on the elixir furnace in its idleness 雲覆瑤壇淨，苔生丹竈閑. (Xia Fangqing 夏方慶, *jinshi* 785–805)[32]

---

[27] See Li Pei 李裴, "Qianxi daojiao wenben zhong zaojia yixiang 淺析道教文本中皂莢意象," *Daojiao yanjiu* 道教研究 4 (2013), 55–59. Interestingly, one of these soap bean trees is said to have grown swiftly and miraculously at the spot where Xie's master, Cheng Taixu, "transformed" and departed the world. See Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1294), *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑, DZ 296, 42:5b.

[28] See his *Zhang zhenren jinshi lingsha lun* 張真人金石靈砂論, DZ 887, 6a inter alia. On the date and authorship of this work, see Fabrizio Pregadio, "*Zhang zhenren jinshi lingsha lun*" in Schipper and Verellen, v. 1, 382.

[29] Note, for instance, the elixir descriptions found in the eighth-century *Dadong lianzhen baojing xiufu lingsha miaojue* 大洞鍊真寶經修伏靈砂妙訣, DZ 890, 18b *ff*. On the date and possible authorship of this work, see Fabrizio Pregadio, "*Dadong lianzhen baojing xiufu lingsha miaojue*" in Schipper and Verellen, v. 1, 383–84.

[30] *Quan Tangshi*, 277.3143–44.

[31] *Quan Tangshi*, 347.3884.

[32] *Quan Tangshi*, 347.3887.

These accounts may have been the product of imagination, but they represent at least the poets' belief that elixir ingestion was involved in Xie's career. Taking all of these accounts together, we cannot *prove* that Xie Ziran and Tian Yuansu took elixirs, but it is clear that their images included drug-taking. For the methodology that I have adopted here, that is enough.

By this time, there are signs that people were beginning to recognize the wasting effects of heavy metal and mercury ingestion.[33] Daoist sources, though, frequently described these outward maladies as sign that corruption and evil was leaving the body, so the even healthier appearance of these two women after elixir ingestion must have testified to the possible internal improvements that could be expected.[34] Five years before her death, Tian Yuansu ingests the alchemical substances alluded to above and her complexion becomes "more glistening white and pure than before" □色皎潔，逾於昔時. Xie Ziran provides the most striking example. After ingesting drugs supposedly given her by the Queen Mother, we read that

> Blood poured from every pore of her body, drenching her clothing, and forming a landscape picture across the entire face of her Daoist

---

[33] On this point, Han Yu's description of the fate of some of his friends is particularly relevant. See the translation from Han Yü's "Tomb epitaph for the Late Lord Li, Academician of the Imperial Academy" in Timothy M. Davis, "Lechery, Substance Abuse and . . . Han Yu?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135.1 (2015), 80–81. Readers of this article should keep in mind, however, that the "moral" issues surrounding the ingestion of mineral elixirs Davis occasionally claims were the product of later ages. Rather than seeing drug taking as immoral, the evidence suggests only that some in the ninth century were beginning to become aware that elixir ingestion led, at best, to apparent death. For a first approach to these issues, see Michel Strickmann, "On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching," in Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, eds., *Facets of Taoism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 123–92. And, for a plethora of evidence on the growing awareness that even "apparent death" might be an ugly experience, see Sun Changwu 孫昌武, *Daojiao yu Tangdai wenxue* 道教與唐代文學 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2001), 83–114.

[34] For a Song-period description of elixir poisoning, see the *Huandan zhongxian lun* 還丹眾仙論, HY233, 20a.5–20b.1. For a similar description, drawn from *Taiqing shibi ji* 太清石壁記 HY880, and a discussion of the symptoms of metallic poisoning, see Needham, *Science and Civilization*, 5.2:282–84. See also the passages gathered by Sun Changwu 孫昌武, *Daojiao yu Tangdai wenxue* 道教與唐代文學 (Beijing: Renmin, 2001), 112–114.

> robe. When she took it to the creek to wash off the filth, it became even more distinct in aspect and, under the sun, seemed to be golden in color. When struck with the hand, it even sounded like bronze.
>
> 滿身毛髮孔中出血，沾漬衣裳。皆作通帔山水橫紋。就溪洗濁，轉更分明，向日看似金色，手觸之如金聲。

As I mentioned before, by this time there was growing knowledge of the baleful results of elixir ingestion and roughly contemporary Daoist writings contain detailed descriptions of the visible effects, including pustules and bleeding, all the while arguing that this is merely a sign of corruption fleeing the body. Xie Ziran's implied explanation of the bleeding is better yet. Her blood is metallic, a sign that her body is achieving gradual perfection, becoming one with the mineral and metal compounds she ingests.

But there were further miraculous signs—one approaching in strangeness Christian stigmata—that marked the body of Xie Ziran.[35] Cheng Taixu 程太虛 was the male master who ordained Xie Ziran and Han Ziming.[36] Both his canonical biographies and Han Ziming's mortuary text mention his use of magical seals.[37] In fact,

---

[35] Turner and Turner describe stigmata as follows: "For Christians the term stigmata refers to wounds some people bear on the hands and feet and occasionally on the side, shoulder, or back that are believed to be visible signs of participation in Christ's passion." See Turner, Victor, and Edith Turner, "Bodily Marks," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (2nd ed., Vol. 2; Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 1000–1005. Xie Ziran's bodily markings are very different, but they do mark her participation with the Dao in that talismans are a type of celestial script. On the talisman as the writing of heaven, see Xie Shu-wei 謝世維, *Tianjie zhi wen* 天界之文 (Taipei: Shangwu, 2010), 63–124, inter alia. I hasten to add, however, that Xie Ziran's physical markings are seemingly not shared by other Daoists.

[36] Cheng Taixu's biography is to be found in Chen Baoguang 陳葆光, *Sandong qunxian lu* 三洞羣仙錄 DZ 1248 (dated 1154), 7:16a and 17:10a–b and Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1294), *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑, DZ 296, 42:4a–5b. A further aspect that links master and disciple is that both Cheng and Xie have tigers that travel with them as familiars.

[37] Cheng Taixu was said to have been able to bring prosperity to people by means of a pair of seals that he found under a tree. See Chen Baoguang 陳葆光, *Sandong qunxian lu* 三洞群仙錄, DZ 1248, 17:10a, Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1294–1307), *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑, DZ 296, 42:4 *ff*.; and my discussion in Stephen R. Bokenkamp, "Transmissions of a Female Daoist: Xie Ziran (767–795)," Florian C. Reiter, ed., *Affiliation and Transmission in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium* (Berlin: Harrassowitz, 2012), 109–22.

it was a jade seal that he found in the mountain that foretold the arrival of Xie and Han. The mortuary text relays the account as follows:

> Wary concerning the censure that had been visited from prior lives [upon the two women], [Cheng] initially did not transmit his methods [to them]. Later, he was walking in the mountains when he obtained a jade seal inscribed with the words "The seal of the Three Heavens does not await the morrow."[38] When the Master [Han Ziming] and her friend Xie visited his gate to seek ordination, Lord Cheng said "The arrival of the seal had a purpose." He then set up a ritual platform and granted them the talismans and registers of the Three Caverns.[39] By the time the ceremony was complete, the seal had vanished.
>
> 惕先譴而初不傳法，後因山行得玉印。文曰：三天之印不翌日。師與謝友詣門求度。程君曰：印之來哉，有為耶。遂設壇授之以三洞符籙。法事粗畢，印亡所在。

None of the texts that have come down to us describes the women's use of such seals, but Xie Ziran is recorded as having two seals, like official stamps but "gleaming like white jade," appear magically on her knees. From Michel Strickmann, we know about the use of seals that, stamped on the body in Daoist ritual, might effect healing.[40] Her master Cheng Taixu is reported as having used seals in this way, but Xie Ziran's power emanates from within

---

[38] The term 先譴 may be short for 祖先譴責, the censure brought upon one by the ancestors or because of ancestral misdeeds. There is, however, one use of the term found in Pan Shizheng's 潘師正 (585–682) *Order of Succession from the Daoist Scriptural Legacy* 道門經法相承次序, DZ 1128, 3.13b. In discussing ritual days and the actions of the gods on those days, he remarks "they eradicate prior blame and proceed to cultivate later goodness" 解除先譴進修後善. Here, the term appears more general. It could thus apply to any blame from the past, whether committed by the self in a prior life or by one's ancestors. I think the use here is similar and is that the "prior blame" is manifesting itself in the fact that Han Ziming and Xie Ziran were born female.

[39] It is unlikely that this actually occurred. During the Tang, the scriptures of the Three Caverns were granted through a series of ordinations over a period of time. See Charles Benn, *The Cavern-mystery Transmission: A Taoist Ordination Rite of A.D. 711* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 78–98.

[40] See Michel Strickmann, "Seal of the Law: A Ritual Implement and the Origins of Printing," *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 4.2 (1993), 1–83.

rather than from outside her body and does not require material objects.

By now, it will have occurred to you that one of the strangest things about these representations is that these women's bodies seem to have been unusually available for viewing. Chinese women were by custom to remain hidden indoors and their bodies were normally not on display, but even Xie Ziran's knees are the object of male vision.[41] Li Jian describes how he sat beside Xie Ziran to chant scriptures and receive her instruction; the emperor Li Ang 李昂 (Wenzong 文宗) frequently called Han Ziming into the imperial presence and would sit with folded hands and formal demeanor to listen to her intently 師每進見，上未嘗不居正端拱，整容寂聽. Even Han Yu, in his intensely disapproving poem on Xie Ziran, portrays an audience of viewers outside her gates as she soars to heaven from an "empty room."[42] Han Yu further not only describes Han Ziming as beauteous of feature ("Her throat white, cheeks red, long eyebrows glistening black"), but even opines that the reason for her ascent was that celestial beings wished to look upon her as well.[43]

In short, these Daoist women regularly made themselves available to the male gaze. This feature of the women's visual repertoire places them in direct contradistinction to mundane women and, perhaps most importantly, to the appearance of

---

[41] Patricia Ebrey, although writing about the Song, gives the traditional classical sources for the separation of the sexes and the association of women with the inner and the home. She cites several Tang writers as well. See Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 21–44. While there was a marked improvement in the social status and mobility of women during the Tang, these traditional strictures remained in place, especially after the reign of Wu Zhao 武曌 (r. 690–705). See Mi Su 米瀟, "Kaifang yu jingu: Tangdai funü diwei bianxi 開放與禁錮：唐代婦女地位辨析," *Fazhi yu shehui* 法制與社會 1 (2008), 288–89.

[42] For the importance of these observers in constructing the role of Transcendent, see Robert F. Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

[43] The line reads "[Her Highness of the] six palaces wished to know the Master's face and form" 六宮願識師顏形. I have added "her highness" out of the belief that the "six palaces" here, as elsewhere, refers to the abode of the Queen Mother of the West, the same deity who appeared to Xie Ziran.

Buddhist nuns.[44] This, I think, is one of the main points of such accounts. This supposition is underscored by Han Yu's poem on Han Ziming, which begins:

> East and west of the avenue they expound Buddhist scripture
> Beating gongs, blowing conchs, disturbing those in the palace.
> They expound on sin and blessings, enticing, then threatening,
> And the audiences crowd around like duckweed clogs a pond.
> Yellow-robed Daoists also expound and preach,
> But those below their dais are few as bright stars in a night sky.
> The family of that girl from Mount Hua revered the Dao.
> She wished to drive off the foreign religion and restore the mountain's gods.
> So she washed off her makeup, wiped her face, donned crown and cape;
> Her throat white, cheeks red, long eyebrows glistening black.
> Then she ascended the dais to expound the Perfected instructions,
>
> 街東街西講佛經，撞鐘吹螺鬧宮庭。廣張罪福資[45]誘脅，聽眾狎恰排浮萍。黃衣道士亦講說，座下寥落如明星。華山女兒家奉道，欲驅異教歸山靈。洗妝拭面著冠帔，白咽紅頰長眉青。遂來陞座演真訣。

In short, for Han Yu it is Han Ziming's visual availability, as much as her skill at preaching that leads the audience to abandon Buddha halls for Daoist temples.

This leads us to the second part of the repertoire, the facility with language displayed by all three women. In studying later poems on Daoist women, Edward Schafer finds the prevalence of words that "convey an atmosphere suitable to divine beings who, if they speak at all, whisper mysteriously or chant sweetly."[46] In contrast to the reticent, occluded, or mysterious speech of Schafer's Daoist women, Xie Ziran, Han Ziming, and Tian Yuansu are portrayed as vibrant and effective preachers. Han Yu's poem gives a vivid account of how Han Ziming draws the capital audiences formerly enraptured by the preaching of Buddhists.[47] His

---

[44] Tang Buddhist nuns may have been consulted by men, but I have not seen evidence that their bodies were ever available for viewing.

[45] Can also be written as 恣.

[46] Edward H. Schafer, "Capeline Cantos," *Asiatische Studien* 32.1 (1978), 23–24.

[47] On Buddhist preaching during the Tang, see Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China:*

(*Continue on next page*)

description of how women in the audience gave jewelry to support her is actually matched by the mortuary biography of Tian Yuansu. Han Yu describes the gifts Han Ziming received with the words "[the women attending] would pluck out hairpins, peel off bracelets and belts, to pile up gold and jade, glistening and gleaming" 抽簪脫釧解環佩，堆金疊玉光青熒. Tian Yuansu's grave biography records that

> Every time she preached, palace women from the rank of Consort on down would lead one another to listen until there were several thousands in the audience. Some gave up their noble clothes, others their jewels, all through the desire to be her disciples. Countless [women] ascended the hall or entered her chambers [as novitiates].
>
> 每一講說，妃嬪已下相率而聽者僅數千人，或舍名衣，或舍□[珠]寶，願為師弟，升堂入室者不可數焉。

Han Yu also makes extended reference to the fine carriages of the "youth of noble families" who crowd the gates when Han Ziming preached, implying that men attended as well. The fact that Han, Tian, and other women Daoists conducted rituals in the Belvedere of Jade Asterisms is further attested by a number of extant scripts, entitled "hymns in praise of the Dao," written for insertion in their rituals by Hanlin academicians.

If Han Yu is to be believed, the rituals that these women conducted included preaching (*zhuanjing* 轉經 or *jiangjing* 講經).

---

(Note 47—*Continued*)

*A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) 285–89, and Kenneth Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 244–55. The preachers mentioned by Chen, however, are entirely male. Liu Shufen and Wendy Adamek show that nuns preached and conducted circumambulation rituals during the Northern Dynastes and early Tang. (See Liu Shufen, "Art, Ritual, and Society: Buddhist Practice during the Northern Dynasties," *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 8.1 (1995), 19–49 and Wendy Adamek, "A Niche of their Own: The Power of Convention in Two Inscriptions for Medieval Buddhist Nuns," *History of Religions* 49.1 (2009), 15–18.) There are further records that Buddhist nuns preached in the inner palace during the reign of Wu Zhao 武曌 (r. 690–705). See Chen Jinhua, "Family Ties and Buddhist Nuns in Tang China: Two Studies," *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 15.2 (2002), 51–85, and "The Tang Palace Buddhist Chapels, *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32 (2004), 81–82.

We even know, in the case of the *Xie Ziran biography*, something of the content of her teachings. This is one of the things that receive short shrift from those modern scholars who wish to separate fact from fancy, and it is a shame since we thus stand to lose sight of the teachings and innovations in practice promulgated by the women. Like Yang Xi and Zhou Ziliang before her, Xie Ziran entertained envoys from the Queen Mother of the West. Unlike her behavior towards these men, to whom she sent only envoys, the Queen Mother herself descended to dine with Xie. While there is no record that Xie kept detailed transcripts of her visits, as did the two men, she is quite specific about the dates and content of her celestial visitations. And Li Jian describes how and why he learned of them. Even provided with corroborating details of time and place, such visions are not the stuff of mundane history. And so, if we follow the analytical path most often explored, we tend to disregard what was likely most important to Xie Ziran and to those who formed her image—the information she was able to bring from these meetings that constituted her contributions to the development of Daoist practice. But her voice was heard by her contemporaries. For example, on the night of the Middle Prime festival, the 15th of the seventh lunar month, the Queen Mother descended and, seeing Xie Ziran, remarked "It's been two kalpa cycles since we parted" 別汝兩劫矣 thereby confirming Xie's status as a descended deity like the famous Dongfang Shuo 東方朔.[48] During the course of their banquet, one of the envoys announces that he is going to heaven to see how the holiday rites are being conducted there. He returns with the news that the festival is even more lavish and well attended than in previous years. Asked the reason, he reports that "It is because this time you do not burn nipple incense. The Perfected of Heaven detest it. You should only burn blended incense." (此度不燒乳頭香，乳頭香天真惡之。唯可燒和香耳). Whatever its constituents, it is likely that nipple incense was disturbing to Xie Ziran and other women practitioners due to its erotic shape. Now she has it on the highest authority that it is

[48] See Kristofer M. Schipper, *L'Empereur Wou des Han dans la légende taoïste: Han Wou-ti nei-tchouan* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1965).

unwelcome among the gods.

Nipple incense is mentioned twice in the story, so this is clearly an innovation in practice that Xie Ziran wished to drive home. But there are a number of further messages. Some are seemingly mundane: (1) One should not taste offerings before they are made and the utensils must be kept clean as well; (2) Meditating while reading the *Scripture of the Yellow Court* brings blessings, while mumbling through it quickly brings immediate punishment from the gods; (3) One should recite first the outer scripture of the *Yellow Court* and then the inner scripture associated with the goddess Wei Huacun; (4) In bowing to images, three bows are okay, but four are better; (5) One need not chant the entire ten stanzas of the hymn *Pacing the Void*, stanzas one, five and eight will suffice. Such messages from the gods are clearly intended to reform Daoist practice. From such revelations we stand to learn something of contemporary practice.

Some of Xie's teachings, however, are more innovative and more fully discussed. Here is one: While there is a distinct difference between the ingestion of herbs to extend life and practices that will allow one to ascend to heaven, Xie nonetheless lists a number of helpful herbs and, in some cases, details how to prepare them. True practices of the Dao, and especially alchemical operations, require that one distance oneself from cities and villages where the stench of meat keeps the gods from descending. In fact, one should be distant from all dwellings, and especially those of relatives, since there is always the "worry that [parental] compassion might suddenly arise, which would negate your practice" (仍須遠家及血屬，慮有恩情忽起，即非修持之行). This is an amazing injunction, in that the emotional bond between parent and child was an established aspect of Daoist morality.[49] And it seems certain that alchemical practice was also part of this isolated mountain existence, since Xie goes on to state that when one drinks water to wash down the elixir one should always use spring water

[49] And several times in the *Xie Ziran Biography* it is mentioned that, after the construction of her mountain retreat by Li Jian, her parents were kept at bay by apparitions, snakes that infested her dwelling, and the like.

and never well water.

The third prominent part of the repertoire ascribed to these women is the associations they develop. In addition to the women who gave clothing and jewelry to Han Ziming and Tian Yuansu as faith offerings, desiring to become disciples after hearing the two women preach, there are several further elaborations of this role that deserve comment. I have mentioned that Xie Ziran and Han Ziming were ordained together. According to Han Ziming's mortuary biography, after Xie's ascent, Han set up a hermitage on the Western Marchmount, Mount Hua. Yet even here, she was not alone. We read that the wives and mothers of high ranking officials who sought to comprehend the mysteries, came to the mountain to wander with her "like flies trying to ascend Dragon Gate by clinging to the tail of a charger" in the inelegant metaphor of the author.[50]

As I mentioned above, Tian Yuansu's mortuary biography was written by Song Ruoxian, one of a talented group of literati sisters. Song relates as well Tian's close association with the Empress Dowager, who would not allow her to retire into the mountains. Xie Ziran, from the very beginning of the account about her, associates closely with Regional Commanders 刺史. Indeed, one of these Regional Commanders, Han Yi, let his daughter leave home with Xie while Li Jian, a subsequent Regional Commander recorded her story and reported it to the throne. Thus, each of the positive accounts of these women's practice emphasizes their association with high-born women as well as government representatives. And, given the elite poems written in praise of their forebear, Xie Ziran, as well as the ritual texts provided by well-known Hanlin Academicians, it is evident that these Daoist women moved from local prominence to practice exclusively in elite circles very near the throne.

It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that in his poem

---

[50] The phrase used is 當時公相母妻探玄者得輿師游，如登龍門附驥尾焉 (At that time the mothers and wives of Ministers and Dukes who sought out the mysterious all came to roam with our Master, attending her like flies trying to ascend Dragon Gate by clinging to the tail of a charger).

on Xie Ziran, Han Yu takes exactly the opposite stance. Xie is a "girl of poor family" 寒女 "young, rash, and without wisdom" 童騃無所識 who had "only heard of divine Transcendents" 但聞有神仙. He ends with feigned pity for her and seeks to make her a negative example for others of her class:

> Alas for that girl of the poor family
> Who forever cast herself among the herds of strange beings.
> Moved by her plight, I made this poem—[spacing in this quotation]
> Those unclear about these things should inscribe it on their sashes.
>
> 噫乎彼寒女，永托異物群。感傷遂成詩，昧者宜書紳。

The people who follow her, though, deserve no such pity in Han Yu's eyes. This is especially true of commoners, who should busy themselves with "the way" of production rather than with vain pious pursuits. Han Yu derisively states their case as follows:

> The hungry ones among these common families should
> Occupy themselves with weaving and plowing.
> They must ensure plenty for their progeny below
> And have enough to present above to their lords and parents.
> Those who depart from this path,
> Are simply casting their bodies aside.
>
> 寒衣及饑食，在紡績耕耘。下以保子孫，上以奉君親，
> 苟異於此道，皆為棄其身。

With regard to Han Ziming, Han Yu cannot but acknowledge that her clientele comes from among the rich and powerful 豪家, but he makes them seem as common as possible. Their chariots choke the lanes of the capital, they pile up their jewelry in support of the Dao, and they mill around Han Ziming in uncomprehending crowds. Even in the Xie Ziran poem, though, the very vehemence with which Han Yu proclaims the "baseness" of those who followed these women Daoists tends to confirm the extent to which they actually did appeal to the highest classes.

Like the other features we have discussed, this particular element of the Daoist woman's repertoire is frequently invoked and

so must have some special relevance. Buddhist nuns lived together and enjoyed equally close friendships, sometimes with the high born, so it does not seem to be a matter of contestation directed at Buddhist practitioners. My hypothesis at this point is that, despite Xie Ziran's injunction that one must maintain a distance from human society to practice self-cultivation and alchemy, this particular element enters the stories to show that it is possible to achieve transcendence even within the crowded imperial palace. This was a frequent point of contention in Daoist circles since the fourth century. There are further several sentences in the biography of Tian Yuansu that seem to support this conclusion. After she begins taking drugs, Tian enjoys the descent of deities, so that "entering her chambers to practice, she had Perfected and Transcendents as companions; ascending the [high seat during] Retreat rituals to preach, divine cranes would circle about" 入□[室]修持，則與真□[仙]為侶；登齋講說，則有靈鶴徘徊. Such phrases remind us that even the transcendent realms are well-populated and bustling. So, just as the gods descend in ritual, they will also consort with practitioners in the quiet spaces of public buildings. Then, when Tian desires to retreat back into the mountains, the Empress Dowager denies her and she concludes that it is indeed possible to "wander freely in the [ritual] space of the Dao and its potencies, to let her heart rest on the edges of the white clouds" 乃從□[容]於道德之場，棲心於白雲之表. It is, in short, possible to transcend the dusty world around her through ritual and meditation *within* the palace.

Is every incident I have recounted to be regarded as historically accurate? No, but the claims are. Together they point to a repertoire that was available to the women Daoists of the Belvedere of Jade Asterism at the end of the eighth and into the ninth centuries and, through them, to other woman practitioners as well. We can thus begin to see how these tales might have supported an alchemical sect of Daoism, consisting largely of female adepts, who advocated a rather different style of Daoism from that we are accustomed to reading about in canonical scripture. For them, the traditional interiority of a woman's body proved analogue to the secret spaces deemed necessary for alchemical endeavor. In place of the bodily

adornment of mundane women, these Daoists' bodies bore proudly and outwardly the signs of their inner achievement.[51] Unlike the Buddhist women of the capital convents, Xie Ziran, Han Ziming, and Tian Yuansu moved freely among men, displayed the marks of their practice, and preached boldly before throngs of elite followers within the capital. With no need to hide away in the mountains or the cloister to complete their practice, they stood testimony to a more public persona for Daoist practitioners.

[51] This places such accounts in absolute contradistinction to Christian accounts of the female body. According to David Brakke, for instance, early Christian monastic literature regularly associated interior spiritual manliness with the exterior masculinized body so that there was for some authors a "sliding scale of virtue equated with sliding gender of bodies." David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 182–212, "Manly Women, Female Demons, and Other Amazing Sights: Gender in Combat." These Daoist accounts likewise employ the female body to display inner achievements, but the display is womanly and not masculinized at all.

《道教研究學報：宗教、歷史與社會》第八期（2016）
*Daoism: Religion, History and Society*, No. 8 (2016), 7–33

# 熱血姊妹：謝自然傳及其相關女冠

柏夷

## 摘要

過去十年內，謝自然的白日升天傳說大量地引起學者的注意。他們多半採取歷史考證法，試圖把謝自然及與其相關的女冠的出身背景、個人心理、社會文化生活等弄清楚。基於謝自然的白日升天傳說的故事性的徹底認識，本文對傳說的內涵進行文學性考察以顯出傳說所創造的女冠形象。這個形象或是女冠自己頒布的、或是讚美及批評他們的官員文人給她們構造的。但無論如何，此構造的形象不能以「欺詐的假設」罪名棄而不顧之。用現代辭彙，這個形象是一種「廣告」用來支持一群終於在唐長安大明宮玉晨觀內傳教、講經、進行科儀、服食丹藥、與宮女交往的女道士們。

**關鍵詞**：血、女冠、唐代煉丹術、韓自明、田元素