

Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity : Ge Hong's Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi).

In: Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident. 2007, N°29, pp. 95-119.

Abstract

This paper attempts to answer the questions : What was Ge Hong trying to do when he wrote the Baopuzi ? What were his arguments ? And why, within the context of the time, were these arguments significant ? In answering these questions, the essay claims that there is a unified set of ideas concerning humans, sages, and the spirit world in the Baopuzi. Moreover, it is a set of ideas that underlies both the inner and outer portions of the text.

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Résumé

Hommes, esprits et sages dans l'Antiquité tardive : Le Maître qui embrasse la simplicité (Baopuzi) de Ge Hong

Le présent article s'efforce de répondre à la question de savoir quelle pouvait être la visée de Ge Hong lorsqu'il composa le Baopuzi. Quelles idées y a-t-il avancées et comment les a-t-il défendues ? Enfin, qu'est-ce qui à la lumière de son époque donne à ses arguments un tour si particulier ? Nous soutenons dans ces pages qu'il y a une réelle cohérence argumentative et une vision d'ensemble dans le discours de Ge Hong sur les humains, les sages et les esprits. Cette ensemble d'idées innerve aussi bien les chapitres intérieurs qu'extérieurs de l'ouvrage.

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Puett Michael. Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity : Ge Hong's Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi). In: Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident. 2007, N°29, pp. 95-119.

doi : 10.3406/oroc.2007.1087

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/oroc_0754-5010_2007_num_29_29_1087

Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity: Ge Hong's *Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi)*

Michael Puett

Allow me to begin with a characteristic statement from Ge Hong's *Baopuzi*:

Since the time of Han and Wei, a proliferation of sayings has flourished in abundance. Although their meanings could plumb the deepest mysteries and their points could drive the roaring waves, and if one could set them forth, one could cause auspicious omens to appear in the heavens above and favorable signs to emerge from the earth..., there are no sages in our time to organize their ranked splendor.¹

The statement makes reference to two of the issues one finds appearing repeatedly in texts from the first to the fourth centuries CE. First, how to deal with the plethora of writings that had been progressively accumulating since antiquity. And, second, how to deal with the issue of sagehood – which texts are by sages, how sages should organize the plethora of texts, and how to define a sage.

But certain points in Ge Hong's statement are distinctive. To begin with, Ge Hong explicitly states that the texts produced since the time of the Han and Wei are enlightening – a critique of the view that earlier texts were better and more sagely than recent ones. Moreover, and relatedly, Ge Hong is explicitly stating that what is needed is not to return to the teachings of earlier sages but rather to turn to a current sage who can bring order to the huge volume of recent writings.

Ge Hong's *Baopuzi* was written in the early fourth century. The text is well known as an invaluable source for studying the religious practices of Chinese late antiquity. Indeed, of all the texts written from the late Han to the beginning of the Tang, the *Baopuzi* is probably, at least for scholars studying religion, the single most often-read work. The reason for this is very simple: the text contains extensive discussions of the religious practices of the day, particularly those aimed at the attainment of immortality.

As I will discuss below, I think this is indeed a very useful way to read the text. What I would like to do here, however, is start with a somewhat different set of questions. What was Ge Hong doing in the *Baopuzi*? Why did he write the text? More specifically, if the text is a helpful compendium of practices of the day (and it is), why would he write such a work? What were his goals and what was he arguing? And, within the context of the time, why were these arguments significant?

When we pose these questions, we will see that there is in fact a unified argument concerning humans, sages, and the spirit world in the *Baopuzi*. Moreover, it is an argument that underlies both the inner and outer portions of the *Baopuzi*. I mention this in particular because, since the *Baopuzi* is so often used as an anthology of the religious practices of the day, the “*Nei pian*” (Inner Chapters) is read much more frequently than the “*Wai pian*” (Outer Chapters). But if there is a unified argument underlying both portions of the text, then we need to accord both portions the same level of attention and to understand the logic of the distinction between them.

It is also worth noting immediately that the argument of the *Baopuzi* is, in the context of the time, rather counter-intuitive. As such, it will provide an interesting lens into the debates of the period.

In short, my goal in this paper will be to use the distinctive voice of Ge Hong to outline some of the debates in late antiquity concerning the relations of humans and spirits. And I hope to do so precisely by beginning with the larger arguments that underlie the *Baopuzi*.²

The Clarity of the Sages

Ge Hong’s basic argument begins with a claim that there is a fundamental distinction between the heavenly and the earthly. At the largest level, this distinction can be spoken of in terms of Heaven and Earth, although it is also the case that heavenly things can exist in earthly creatures as well. The heavenly aspects of the cosmos include *shen*, spirits. These spirits do not die but rather live as long as Heaven and Earth themselves. Moreover, they have *ming*, clarity: they are able to see accurately and understand what to do in any given context. In contrast to this, there is the earthly. The natural, or spontaneous (*ziran*), aspect of the earthly involves a fundamental cycle: things live, and then they die. There are good things associated with the earthly. For example, earthy creatures are capable of benevolence, *ren*. This is true of humans, and it is also true of animals.

Humanity, as an earthly species, is subject to the fate of all such earthly creatures. Humans live, and humans die. And sometimes, before they die, they

can be benevolent to each other. Unlike all other animals, however, humans have a history based in part upon a transcendence of that fate. They are capable of achieving, to certain extents, elements of the heavenly.

For one piece of Ge Hong's argument about cosmology and human potential, let us turn first to chapter thirty-seven of the "Wai pian." The chapter, characteristically, contains a definition of the heavenly and the earthly, here discussed in terms of Qian and Kun (the hexagrams of Heaven and Earth, respectively):

Qian has benevolence (*ren*) and also clarity (*ming*); Kun has benevolence but is without clarity.³

The characteristic of earthly creatures is thus that, at best, they are capable of benevolence. But they cannot obtain clarity, which is only heavenly. Thus, for example, animals are capable of benevolence:

Insects fly and worms crawl. They are also capable of benevolence. Thus, their concerns and love grow when nurturing the young, and their grief and sorrow are made manifest through their calls.⁴

But, having no clarity, they are doomed to a terrible fate:

But without being suspicious they will go into pits and wells, and without realizing it enter snares and nets. They have benevolence, but they have no clarity. Therefore, they together run into disasters and hasten into mistakes.⁵

In short, animals are capable of benevolent feelings toward members of their own species, but they have no clarity.

This, of course, is also true of humans in their natural state. Humans are also capable of benevolence. They too care for their young and mourn their dead. But they also, in that natural state, lived in caves or nests, had neither fire with which to cook food nor clothing with which to keep warm, and had to rely on wild and potentially poisonous plants for sustenance. Like other animals, they tended to die very young, in unnecessary ways.

Fortunately, however, humans invented cooking, shelter, agriculture, clothing, and the other arts of civilization to take humanity out of this natural state:

[Humans] used fire to shine light in the shadows and to alter raw food. They tied together the pillars and beams to avoid living in nests and caves. They selected grains to plant in order to substitute for the fieriness of poisons. They wove garments and clothing in order to change from being naked and tattooed. They used boats and oars in order to cross what was before impassable. They utilized oxen and horses in order to stop from having to carry things on their backs while

walking. They defined ordered ranks and authority in order to suppress disasters and chaos. They created implements and weapons in order to guard against the unexpected. They invented writings and pacts in order to control the hundred officials. They established rites and regulations in order to build respect for customs and teachings. All of these were made from great clarity.⁶

All of these inventions were a result of clarity – what is otherwise lacking among creatures on earth and is found only in the heavenly.⁷

In short, what is distinctive about humans is that occasionally some of these humans, unlike other earthly creatures, are born with a bit of heavenly clarity (*ming*). Ge Hong offers no explanation as to why it would be the case that some humans are born with clarity – it simply is the case that they are. And, importantly for Ge Hong, there is no way for this clarity to be cultivated among humans: it is simply an endowment (*cai*) that some humans happen to possess:

Clarity is an endowment (*cai*); benevolence is a practice (*xing*).⁸

Because some humans are born with this heavenly clarity, they are to some extent like spirits: they are like those creatures in the heavens that have clarity. It is an endowment from Heaven, and one that enters into divinity. Ge Hong presents his argument in terms of a dialogue with his skeptical disciples, who state that benevolence, not clarity, is the highest quality for humans:

His disciples asked again: “The *Yi* (Book of Changes) asserts ‘The way of establishing humanity is called benevolence and propriety.’ As such, for humanity there is nothing better than benevolence.”

Baopuzi responded: “The reason it says that is because benevolence resides in practice (*xing*). Practice can be accomplished through effort, whereas clarity (*ming*) enters into divinity (*shen*). It is necessarily an endowment (*cai*) given by Heaven; it is not something one can be taught (*xun*).”⁹

In potential opposition to at least one way of reading the classical texts, then, Ge Hong is arguing that there is something higher and more crucial than benevolence. But it is not something that can be taught or striven for. It is simply an endowment that some humans happen to possess.

Those humans who are born with this bit of heavenly clarity are called “sages.” Unlike all other creatures on earth, human sages have links with the heavenly:

Only a sage combines power with Heaven.¹⁰

For Ge Hong, these sages are the crucial figures in human history. They are the ones who, using their Heavenly clarity, have created (*zuo*):

Those who create are called sages; those who transmit are called worthies.¹¹

Without sages, humans would have continued to live throughout their history as they initially did: in caves, without clothing, without agriculture, without a state. The reason that human history has gone differently than that of any other earthly creature is because sages, born with a bit of Heavenly clarity, have invented successive pieces of artifice to lift humanity to higher levels. For Ge Hong, all of the arts of civilization are purely an artifice of the sages. They are, at least from the point of view of earth, unnatural.

This is true not only of the fundamental inventions that have lifted humanity above the world of animals. It is also true for many of the crucial events in human history. For example, Tang's overthrow of the Xia, and Wu's overthrow of the Shang, were for Ge Hong instances of clarity, not benevolence. It was not benevolent for Wu Wang to commit regicide. But it was the right thing to do. Tang and Wu were therefore sages, with divine clarity. But they were not benevolent.

Tang and Wu transgressed and captured [the rulership], then accorded and held on to it. This was truly a lack of benevolence. They responded to Heaven and changed the mandate; this was due to their clarity.¹²

The shift of the dynasties, therefore, was not a result of a benevolent ruler replacing a non-benevolent one. It was an example of sages, acting out of heavenly clarity, acting in non-benevolent ways. And they were right to do so.

Transcendence

There are other things that this clarity has brought to humanity as well. As mentioned above, everything on earth dies. That is part of the *ziran* of the earthly. However, using the clarity with which they are endowed, sages were also able to develop artificial techniques that allow humans to transcend the earthly realm, ascend into the skies, and become long-lived like the spirits above. For Ge Hong, such techniques leading to ascension and long life are purely artificial, allowing humans to become something that they naturally, as earthly creatures, could never otherwise attain.

Let us turn to one of Ge Hong's staged dialogues in the "Nei pian":

Someone said: "That there existed among men a Lao Peng is like the fact that pines and cedars exist among trees. It is only natural (*ziran*). How could it be attained through study?"¹³

According to the view that Ge Hong will try to dispute, it is perfectly natural for long-lived people to occasionally appear, just as trees whose leaves do not die in the winter appear as well.

At first glance, this might appear to be an argument that Ge Hong would accept, since he is so committed to the view that the characteristics of certain extraordinary humans are simply endowments, and not something that can be learned. His rebuttal to the argument is thus worth quoting in full:

Baopuzi responded: “In general, in the molding, smelting, forming, and transforming [of things], nothing is more efficacious (*ling*) than humans. Thus, if they obtain the simplest means, they are able to employ and appropriate the myriad things; if they obtain the deepest, they are able to achieve long life and penetrating vision. If they know the best drugs for extending their years, they use the drugs to seek transcendence. They understand the long life of tortoises and cranes, and therefore they imitate their movements so as to increase their years. Moreover, the branches and leaves of the pine and cedar are, when compared to other trees, different. The form and structure of the tortoise and crane are, when compared with other animals, distinct. But when it comes to Lao Peng being compared to other humans, his achievement of long life is not of a different category. It is due to his obtaining a way, not to nature (*ziran*).”¹⁴

For Ge Hong, there is nothing natural about the fact that some humans live long. This is an artifice, precisely like the discovery of fire or the invention of agriculture. The reason that some humans live long is because they have learned to appropriate other things in the world that will enable them to live longer than they naturally should. For example, they have discovered drugs that extend their years. They have also witnessed animals – like tortoises and cranes — that are long-lived, and they have learned to imitate the movements of such animals in order to gain the same longevity. These are arts: invented by sages, and learned by the latter-born through study. There is nothing natural about it.

As Ge Hong states:

The true men of earliest antiquity, concerned and mindful of those to come who could be taught, for them created (*zuo*) recipes and methods, hoping to guide them in avoiding the misfortune of death.¹⁵

Techniques for longevity are creations.

Long life, in other words, is not an endowment. The ability to develop techniques for long life is an endowment, just as is the ability to develop techniques for agriculture and statecraft. For the latter-born, the key is then to study these techniques and thereby achieve something unnatural.

Ge Hong is therefore committed to the view that no one can achieve long life suddenly, on their own. It always requires putting into practice a bestowed teaching.

Someone asked, “In antiquity, was there ever one who did not put into practice something that had been bestowed and yet suddenly on their own became long lived?” Baopuzi responded: “No one.”¹⁶

Achieving long life is thus for Ge Hong an entirely non-natural action on the part of humanity. It is based upon the discovery of techniques that will allow practitioners to become something other than what would have been natural (*ziran*) for humanity. One of these techniques, for example, involves ingesting substances – gold and cinnabar – that have been found to refine the human body:

Now, as for gold and cinnabar being substances, the more you heat them the more the alterations and transformations are mysterious... If you ingest these two substances, you refine the human body and frame. Therefore, one is able to order humans to not grow old and die.¹⁷

And, in the case of gold, it turns out that artificially produced gold works better than natural gold, so Ge Hong also discusses methods of making gold (*zuo jin*).¹⁸ Here too, these ways and techniques (*dao shu*) of manufacturing gold are ascribed to earlier sages – in this case, Liu An, among others.¹⁹

The consequence of the existence of these various techniques is that an entirely new form of humanity has been created: transcendents (*xian*). These are the figures who have utilized these methods to refine their bodies to attain longevity:

Now, if the transcendent humans use medicines and substances to nourish their bodies and use techniques (*shu*) and calculations to extend their allotment, they make it such that illness does not grow within nor anxiety enter from without. Even though they are long seen and do not die, their old bodies do not change. If you have their way, this will not be taken as difficult.²⁰

For Ge Hong, there are three levels of transcendents. One of these includes those who have chosen to remain on earth as long-lived figures removed from society. But the highest are those who have ascended into the skies to join the celestial pantheon of spirits.²¹ In other words, those who, through the use of these artificial techniques, have transcended the earthly realm completely and fully joined in the heavenly.

Humans and Spirits

Ge Hong insists on the humanity of sages, as well as on the potential of humans, with the use of sagely methods and techniques, to ascend into the heavens and join the celestial pantheon. Given such an insistence, what

relationship does Ge Hong see between humans and those spirits who are already in the celestial pantheon?

Interestingly, the relationship is not harmonious.

To begin with, the techniques that have been invented by sages allow humans to gain knowledge of, and often power over, the spirits themselves. Let us turn to one transcendent, named Yuanjun. Yuanjun was the teacher of Laozi, and also the author of a set of techniques that have been handed down to Ge Hong. Here is how Ge Hong describes Yuanjun's accomplishments:

There is also a *Taiqing shendan* (*Divine Elixir of Great Purity*). Its method comes from Yuanjun. Yuanjun was the teacher of Laozi... Yuanjun is a great divine transcendent (*da shen xian*) man. He is able to modulate and harmonize the yin and yang, employ and guide the ghosts, spirits (*shen*), wind, and rain, and drives the nine dragons and the twelve white tigers. All of the transcedents under Heaven are controlled by him. Yet the basis of his teachings also came from studying the way and ingesting cinnabar, not from nature (*ziran*). How much the more so for the average man!²²

Because of his methods, Yuanjun is able not only to modulate yin and yang but also able to control spirits as well as the wind and rain – phenomena usually under the control of the spirits. Here again, we are told that these abilities are not natural (*ziran*) but rather a product of learning the methods to obtain these powers that are (for humans) unnatural.

Similarly, it was Huangdi's (the Yellow Emperor) obtaining of a text of techniques that granted him power over the spirits as well:

In ancient times, Huangdi went east to Mount Qing, passed Mountain Feng, and saw Master Zifu. He received the *Sanhuang neiwen* (*Inner Writings of the Three August Ones*), and thereby gained charge of and summoned the myriad spirits.²³

Not only do the techniques allow humans to gain power over the spirits, but some of them actually entail deceiving the spirits. As Ursula Cezdich and Robert Campany have brilliantly demonstrated, the techniques of *shijie* – which Campany translates as “escape by means of a corpse” – involve deceiving the celestial powers into believing that one has died.²⁴ This allows the practitioner to escape from their control and roam freely throughout the cosmos.

The Humanity of Sages

In short, everything from agriculture and the wearing of clothes to the ability to live long is a result of heavenly clarity – of sages discovering techniques that allow humans to transcend the natural world of other earthly

creatures and move toward the heavenly. And, in the most extreme form, these techniques allow humans to become transcendents and join the heavenly realm altogether.

But what is the link between all of these different techniques? Are they all part of a single comprehensive – and perhaps ultimately divine – understanding of how humans should develop themselves?

The answer for Ge Hong is very firmly no. Each of these techniques and inventions is simply the result of human sages appearing who are able to solve specific problems in human history. We thus have techniques for making clothes, for becoming transcendents, for building houses. In the future we may have other techniques for other things as well. What we possess is simply the result of what has been preserved, transmitted, and built upon from previous sages.

A crucial part of Ge Hong's argument is therefore that, although sages are crucial for human history, they are also limited. Ge Hong strongly opposes any claim that sages are divine beings, descended from Heaven, with a full knowledge of everything. On the contrary, sages are human, and their knowledge is usually limited to an understanding of a specific domain:

People today say that sages descend from Heaven, that they are divine and efficacious (*shen ling*) beings, and that there is nothing they do not know and nothing they are unable to do. So deeply do they yield to and revere their names that they do not dare to go back and consider them in regard to what occurred. They say that if a sage was unable to do something, then no one is able to do it; that if a sage does not know something, then no one can know it. Is this not laughable? If now we compare them with recent occurrences, I think we can thereby understand.²⁵

Ge Hong goes on to give examples from the early texts in which Confucius is reported not to have known things. He then concludes:

But that he did not know of the methods of transcendence, how could this cause wonder?²⁶

Confucius was a great sage, but, like all sages, his knowledge was limited. He was a great ethical thinker, but he knew nothing of transcendence.

Thus, Ge Hong argues that sagehood is simply excellence in any given activity. There can thus be sages of politics and ethics; there can equally be sages of transcendence.

A sage is the name for the ultimate in any human activity; it is not limited simply to the study of culture (*wen*).²⁷

Since sages are specialists in certain activities, it also follows that there are significant things that any one sage cannot do. He makes this point in particular in regard to the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, both of whom were sages, and neither of whom achieved – or even knew to attempt – transcendence.

If there are certainly things that sages are unable to do, then there is nothing to wonder at that they did not attain transcendence. That they did not attain transcendence does not undermine that they were sages.²⁸

Sages are crucial for human history, and their clarity reaches into divinity. But they are not fully divine. They are human, and they are limited. Some are great innovators in the arts of civilization, some are great ethical teachers, and some are great figures in developing techniques of transcendence. But no sage knows everything.

The Disunity of Sagely Knowledge

The arts of the sages do not, therefore, form a unity. Indeed, many of the arts of the various sages are mutually contradictory. Most significantly for his overall argument, Ge Hong is committed to the notion that the techniques for transcendence conflict with the requirements of building a just society. Not only must those who want to practice the arts of transcendence remove themselves from society in order to focus on the arts, but the results of the arts, by definition, are such that one removes oneself from human society:

As for one who knows this way, what use has he for rulers and princes? ²⁹

A transcendent does not need kings. Nor do they need clothes, agriculture, or housing. The arts of one domain of sagely inventions have no necessary relationship to others, and they may indeed contradict each other.

Moreover, even a single sagely teaching can be dispersed over time—without its pieces being any the less sagely:

Someone said: “As for the ways of the sagely human, they cannot be obtained in pieces, divided and dispersed; they must be linked and connected. Only then is it sagely.”³⁰

Ge Hong responds by pointing out that Confucius’s disciples only obtained pieces of his teachings, and yet their understanding was, for each piece they obtained, accurate.

Sagely knowledge, then, is not a single, unified system that explains everything. It is simply clarity concerning some particular endeavor. Thus, as

we saw above, one can have a body of sagely teachings dealing with ethics and a separate, contradictory, but equally sagely, body of teachings dealing with transcendence. And these bodies of knowledge can be dispersed further over an historical process without that knowledge being any less sagely.

The Progressive Accumulation of Human Knowledge

And this is why study is so important for Ge Hong. For non-sages, of course, study is important, as it is the only way to learn the arts taught by the sages. Precisely because the arts are not natural, they can be learned even by those who do not possess sagely clarity:

To gaze at the distance of the Hyades and calculate the intervals of yin and yang; to follow the winter insects and understand when to add an intercalary month: what divinity (*shen*) is there in this? It is only study.³¹

The knowledge that has been attained by humans concerning the cosmos is thus an entirely human knowledge. Just as sages are not divine beings from Heaven, so their knowledge is not divine either. It is simply a process of humans learning the arts and techniques discovered by those sages who happened to have clarity concerning certain issues.

As such, everything from arts such as carving and archery to the understanding of the nature of ghosts and spirits requires practice and study:

In general, the lesser arts of hewing, paring, carving, and painting, and the easier activities of archery, chariotry, and riding all require practice before one can become good at them. How much more so the breadth of human patterns, the distance of the way and the power, the alternation of yin and yang, and the dispositions of ghosts and spirits.³²

But, even for sages, study is absolutely necessary. Although sages have a bit of divine clarity, their knowledge is always limited to particular techniques. Moreover, they are still part of the human world on earth, and their sagely actions involve building upon that which came before and recognizing, at this current moment, what needs to be done next. As Ge Hong states:

Now, the Duke of Zhou was the highest sage, but every day he read a hundred chapters.³³

Here again, sagehood for Ge Hong clearly does not mean coming up with a single view that is perfect for all time and for all contexts. Since sages are human and limited, they must also learn from other sages and from previous history.

For the same reason, the history of the inventions of the sages for Ge Hong is one of progressive accumulation, with each sage building upon and improving upon the inventions that came before. Ge Hong is thus committed to a progressivist view of human history:

It is like boats and carts being substituted for walking and fording, and writing in ink replacing knotting ropes: all of these were invented (*zuo*) later and were better than the former activities.³⁴

Ge Hong is thus consistently opposed to any notion that the past was necessarily superior to the present. Indeed, as long as sages are being recognized and as long as humans are continuing to learn their arts, the world of humanity should only continue to improve.

This progressivist view explains why it is so important for Ge Hong that new sages continue to arise. If a sage in antiquity had been able to invent all that was necessary for humans, then additional sages, by definition, would have been unnecessary. Since, on the contrary, sages are part of the movement of history, an endless process of new sages emerging to build upon the inventions of the previous sages and doing what is necessary for the current historical moment is essential.

Revelation and Human Knowledge

Given this emphasis on the humanity of sages, how should we understand Ge Hong's discussions of revelation? In some places, Ge Hong does talk about revelations from the spirits that exist in the heavens. At first glance, this might seem to contradict the overall emphasis of the work. Elsewhere, Ge Hong's explicit concern is with human invention – even to the point where those techniques create potential conflict with the divine powers. So how are we to interpret his references to revelation?

In fact, Ge Hong maintains his consistency. Let us turn to one of these stories:

In ancient times Zuo Yuanfang was deep in thought at Mount Tianzhu, a spirit man (*shen ren*) gave him classics on gold and cinnabar. This was during the chaos of the end of the Han, and he was unable to combine and prepare them (*he zuo*).³⁵

Ge Hong goes on to detail how his relatives received the texts from Zuo, how they were then passed down to Ge Hong's teacher, and how Ge Hong then received them from his teacher.

This is indeed a revelation. But who gives the revelation? The reference to "spirit man" makes it clear that this was not spirit in the heavens who

descended to give this knowledge. It was rather a human who had achieved transcendence and who then returned to reveal teachings to normal humans.

The point can be made in larger terms with Ge Hong. For Ge Hong, the pantheon of spirits with whom humans deal in seeking transcendence seems to be composed not of creatures who were always spirits but rather humans who have become transcendentals and are thereafter helping other humans to do the same. I say “seems to be” because it is not always possible to trace the etiology of every spirit mentioned. But, tellingly, every figure whose etiology can be traced is in fact a human who has become a transcendent. Another example among many would be the adept Zhang Liang, who received “divine methods” (*shen fang*).³⁶ The methods were granted by several figures, “all of whom were transcendent humans.”³⁷

Revelation from divine powers occurs, but the revelation appears to be from divine powers who were formerly humans – transcendentals who then return to pass on their teachings to the humans still on earth. Revelations, then, is still a human endeavor, not bodies of knowledge handed down by the gods.

The rest of the story about Zuo Yuanfang is telling as well. Even after the revelation from the spirit man has occurred, the revealed knowledge does not immediately become part of human knowledge. The key for Ge Hong is that the texts need to be placed into a form that other humans can understand and put into practice. Zuo Yuanfang himself was unable to do this in the chaos that occurred at the end of the Han. Ge Hong has now received them, and he is trying to explicate them for other humans.

Here again, then, knowledge for Ge Hong is a human endeavor. The author of the techniques was a human – in this case a human who had achieved transcendence. And it is then up to humans on earth to organize the knowledge, pass it on, and explicate how to put it into practice.

Where Have All the Sages Gone?

This endless process of sages emerging is crucial for another reason as well. Since sages are human and are a part of human history, sagehood for Ge Hong depends upon acting with clarity at certain moments, not necessarily creating something that would be right for all time. Tang’s overthrow of the Xia, for example, was non-benevolent, sagely clarity. But the clarity was based in that particular historical context: at that moment, Tang did what was necessary. The overthrow did create a precedent for later ages: when a bad king rules, an overthrow may be necessary. But only a sage can know when to employ that particular precedent: Wu, a sage, accurately employed the

precedent and, in sagely clarity, overthrew the Shang. But a non-sagely figure employing that same precedent against a good dynasty would be, clearly, wrong. Thus, sages are always a part of history, using their clarity to build upon the inventions of past sages and knowing what, at a given historical moment, needs to be done.

This helps to explain some of Ge Hong's concerns. If the world needs an endless progression of new sages, it also needs people to be willing to listen to them. But, unfortunately, current sages are not the ones being given authority.

To begin with, people tend to view the great sages as being in the past. More recent writings are seen as decidedly lesser:

Moreover, the people of today follow the spirits and value the old and ancient, but they downgrade and treat lightly the current times.... Even if there were a book that benefited the current age, people would say that it does not reach up to the transmitted writings from earlier times.³⁸

For Ge Hong, this view is ridiculous. As he argues, in terms of material inventions, there has been a clear progressive accumulation, leading to a shift from humans living in caves, having no clothes, and being dependent on potentially poisonous natural foodstuffs, to the present day of material comfort in which humans can survive the elements and eat fully. Why should humans think that the same progression does not occur in teachings and writings? Should not more recent writings, building upon previous ones, be at least as good as those that existed before? To quote in full a passage given above:

It is like boats and carts being substituted for walking and fording, and writing in ink replacing knotting ropes: all of these were invented (*zuo*) later and were better than the former activities.... People of today all know things are superior to the past; how could it only be writings that do not reach up to antiquity.³⁹

A related problem is, ironically enough, an over-valuation of sages. Because, as mentioned above, sages have come to be seen as divine and all-knowing, a standard has become set that no human – including real sages – could ever live up to. Moreover, it would be unnecessary for more recent humans to be deemed sages anyway, since, if the previous sages were divine, then everything that would need to be developed has already been developed. And, of course, if the earlier sages were divine, then their texts would contain all knowledge. Thus, the fact that certain teachings – such as those dealing with transcendence — will not appear in certain sagely writings is taken as a sign that the teachings are wrong. Hence Ge Hong's repeated statements that

sages are humans, rather than divine powers descended from Heaven, and that sagely knowledge is not a unity.

The consequence of these trends is that, although there has continued to be a proliferation of new texts from the Han onwards, none are recognized as containing sagely wisdom. No one, therefore, is utilizing more recent writings. Even if these texts were not written by sages, the writings should be taken seriously anyway: a crucial part of the progressive accumulation of knowledge is to utilize any body of texts that are helpful for teaching, even if those texts did not come from sages:

One should not discard the sayings that help in teaching because they appear in writings that did not come from sages.⁴⁰

Anything from the past or from existing writings can potentially be helpful, quite apart from whether it was authored by a sage. The role of a sage, on the contrary, is to recognize how to utilize elements – wherever those elements came from – for the current moment.

However, several of the texts written from the mid-Han onwards were in fact written by sages. But none of the sages who have existed since the Han have been recognized as such. Accordingly, they have been unable to provide the proper guidance that humans always need from sages.

Recent Sages

In making the argument that sages are not being recognized, it is of interest to ask precisely which figures since the mid-Han on are the ones who Ge Hong would define as (unrecognized) sages. The answer is telling. One of the most significant figures is Wang Chong, the first century author of the *Lun Heng*. Like other sages, Wang Chong was a creator, and he was able to do so because of his endowment:

Baopuzi said: “I have praisingly spoken of Wang Zhongren’s [Wang Chong’s] creating (*zuo*) the *Lun Heng* in over eighty chapters as exceeding the ordinary and revealing a great endowment (*cai*).”⁴¹

At first glance, Wang Chong may seem like an odd choice to be labeled a sage by Ge Hong. Wang Chong is notorious for his stinging attacks on the superstitions of the day, many of which were among the ones explicitly defended by Ge Hong. Why would Ge Hong single out Wang Chong as an example of a sage?

Although Ge Hong is not explicit as to why he sees Wang Chong as having been so worthy of praise, it is not difficult to speculate. I suspect the reason

for this is that, counter-intuitively, the *Lun Heng* is a work very similar to the *Baopuzi* – both in structure and argument.

One of Wang Chong's explicit concerns was precisely that contemporary sages were no longer being recognized: earlier sages were over-valued, and contemporary sages were no longer recognized as such:

If today there were one better than Confucius and Mozi in speaking of the Way, his name would not be placed as the equal of theirs.⁴²

This resulted, according to Wang Chong, in an over-reverence for one body of early sagely writings (particularly the five classics) and a refusal to accept that other sages as good as or better than Confucius could very easily be alive. Thus, errors and incorrect understandings abound, since no sages are allowed to correct the mistakes and order the practices properly.

In his *Lun Heng*, Wang Chong is very much trying to play that role. The text – a massive compendium of knowledge – involved an attempt to sort through the practices and teachings of the day and to define which of them should be continued and which of them should not.⁴³

The fact that Ge Hong would disagree with some of the particulars of Wang Chong's views (for example, on the question of immortality) is not terribly significant for Ge Hong, since Ge Hong takes it for granted that sages are limited. Wang Chong may have only been able to understand social and political issues and may have therefore only been able to organize those bodies of knowledge relevant to socio-political concerns, but this does not mean that he was not a sage.

And, if the world had recognized Wang Chong as a sage at the time, it would have meant that a limited number of texts would not have come to be seen as absolutely authoritative, that previous sages like Confucius would not have been over-valued, and that sages emerging later would have been recognized as such. In short, many of the problems that Ge Hong feels to have been pervasive and highly dangerous since the mid-Han would have been averted.

The Appearance of a Sage

But this is not what happened. So what for Ge Hong is the solution to all of this? Very simple: the world needs a new sage (properly understood) to arise and be recognized as such. Such a sage would need to organize the body of practices and texts that have accumulated, demonstrate which work and which do not, and organize which teaching should be put into practice and by whom. To refer again to the passage with which I opened this paper:

Since the time of Han and Wei, a proliferation of sayings has flourished in abundance. Although their meanings could plumb the deepest mysteries and their points could drive the roaring waves, and if one could set them forth, one could cause auspicious omens to appear in the heavens above and favorable signs to emerge from the earth..., there are no sages in our time to organize their ranked splendor.⁴⁴

So who will do this? The answer is hinted at in Ge Hong's autobiographical postface, a work that builds directly on the comparable pieces by Sima Qian and Wang Chong.⁴⁵ Ge Hong recounts how he began studying texts, and how he ultimately decided that he was not content to stop at simply being a disciple of a previous master. He therefore began what would become his life goal: to establish an "yi jia zhi yan" – a teaching of a single lineage.⁴⁶ In other words, he wanted to found a new lineage of teachings. And he even (somewhat audaciously) terms himself a master, *zi*. He styles himself "Baopuzi," and he even places most of his text in the form of a dialogue, with his responses to questions introduced by the phrase "Baopuzi yue" ("Baopuzi said") – clearly reminiscent of the dialogue form of the *Analects*, in which Confucius's responses are introduced by "zi yue" ("the master said").

In all of these ways, Ge Hong is making clear reference to the body of writings, from Mencius through Sima Qian and Wang Chong, in which figures implicitly claim to be sages through their denials of sagacity. For each of these later figures, the key was to use references to the *Analects* where Confucius denies his sagacity.⁴⁷ What is interesting about Ge Hong, however, is that he also uses this rhetoric, but he has taken away the denials of sagacity.

In short, Ge Hong is claiming to be the sage of his day, a master who will form his own lineage of teachings, exactly as figures like Confucius did before him. As such, it becomes clear what the *Baopuzi* is intended to be. Ge Hong intends for his text to sort through the previous writings, organize them, explain what works and what does not, and provide proper guidance for the age.

In doing so, Ge Hong attempts to pull together several different strands of earlier teachings and claims. To begin with, Ge Hong is attempting to revive the earlier tradition of sages writing or compiling grand compendia of knowledge – a movement that flourished in the late Warring States and early Han, culminating in works like the *Huainanzi*. Unlike these works, however, Ge Hong is not claiming to write a comprehensive work that will unify all knowledge for all time. On the contrary. Ge Hong's work would be a full compendium of knowledge up to that point, but, given Ge Hong's view of sages, he would also have to be committed to the notion that sages will continue to arise, and new books will continue to be written.

Moreover, Ge Hong is trying to connect to this body of knowledge the entire body of technical traditions that developed over the course of the Warring States and Han.⁴⁸ Ge Hong's claim is that these bodies of knowledge are not only every bit as important as the teachings of figures like Confucius but that they emerged from the same process – sages teaching humanity techniques that will allow them, in different ways, to transcend their natural lot.

Finally, he is trying to connect all of this to a general vision of history that one can find in texts like the *Lun Heng*, a vision of history as driven by the sages. Sages, in such a view, are human and limited. History then consists of a progressive accumulation of sages building upon the work of previous sages. And the *Baopuzi* is the work of a sage at that moment, building upon all that came before.

The division of the *Baopuzi* into two portions — an outer portion devoted to ethical and political philosophy, and an inner portion devoted to techniques for transcendence — is key to his strategy. To begin with, it allows Ge Hong to claim that the technical traditions are as important as the ethical teachings and are derived from the same processes of sagely knowledge. Thus, one has the ethical and political teachings found in the classics and the great masters of the Warring States and thereafter, and of equal importance is the body of technical traditions dealing with immortality. The latter are every bit as much a product of sagely knowledge as the former.

In making such an argument, Ge Hong is also making a further claim concerning his own sagehood. Most previous sages were at best able to play a significant role in developing one of these two traditions. Confucius and Wang Chong, for example, were major figures (or at least should have been, in the case of Wang Chong) in the development of ethical and political teachings, while Yuanjun, for example, was a significant figure in the development of immortality techniques. The fact that none of these figures was able to play a significant role in both traditions does not detract from their sageliness, since, again, sages are limited, and sagely knowledge is not unified.

But note that Ge Hong has now done, according to his reading of history, what no previous sage has been able to do: he has organized both bodies of teachings. While it is true that Huangdi was a ruler and then ascended into the skies – in other words, was able to do both sets of practices – he nonetheless did not leave a full body of writings on both governance and transcendence for the latter-born to follow. Ge Hong is the first in the tradition to be able to organize both. Whether this is due to his having more clarity (*ming*) than previous sages, or to his simply coming at a later period in the progressive

accumulation of knowledge, is unclear. But what is clear is that Ge Hong is not simply a master forming a new lineage – he is claiming to be a master forming a new lineage more comprehensive than any before him.

The Failures of the Sages

But if the goal was to be recognized as a sage, to organize the teachings of the day properly, and to provide a guide that future sages would build upon, then Ge Hong failed. Although hoping to be recognized as a master forming his own lineage, and a lineage more comprehensive than any that had existed before, Ge Hong in fact was to have no such legacy. He would not come to be seen as another sage like Confucius (or even better than Confucius, as Ge Hong appears to be positioning himself). On the contrary, the ultimate legacy of his work is the one mentioned at the beginning of this essay: the *Baopuzi* would ultimately come to be seen as a repository of the practices of the day. It in fact is such a repository, and it does indeed serve this purpose. But it was never to be seen as a great masterly work that would define a new lineage.

Moreover, many of the specific arguments that Ge Hong made to change the world equally failed to win the day. Seekers of transcendence continued to exist, as did work on the earlier classics and masters. But these bodies of traditions did not come to be seen as part of the same form of human knowledge, nor did Ge Hong's (and Wang Chong's) vision of sagehood come into wide acceptance.

Another movement, never even mentioned by Ge Hong, would also continue to grow in strength, namely that of organized Daoism. The Shangqing (Supreme Purity) revelations would occur only a few decades after Ge Hong, and, indeed, one of Ge Hong's close relatives would be intimately involved in the reception and dissemination of the revelations.

Such revelations, of course, flew against much that Ge Hong stood for. Although the Shangqing revelations did teach humans to ascend to the skies and achieve immortality, they did so out of a claim that the knowledge of how to do so was revealed by gods. In contrast, the key for Ge Hong was that such knowledge was humanly-based, created piece by piece through the progressive accumulation of the teachings of sages. The claim that such knowledge came from revelation from higher gods (rather than humans who had succeeded in becoming transcendents) was something that Ge Hong would have strongly opposed.

In short, part of the interest in studying Ge Hong lies in his failure. Like Wang Chong before him, Ge Hong represents an attempt to build the kind of comprehensive, sagely compendium that one sees in much earlier texts like

the *Lüshi chunqiu*, *Huainanzi*, or five classics. But both represent failed attempts. The *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Huainanzi* ultimately failed, but not because they were deemed to be doing something that was impossible. On the contrary, in the third and second centuries BCE the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Huainanzi* were doing what many of the texts of the time were trying to do. There was a wide consensus that building a single body of comprehensive knowledge on the part of human sages was a project that could and should be accomplished. The question was who would be able to do so successfully.

By the time of the Eastern Han, however, this type of project loses its cultural resonance. The concern shifted to different ways of claiming authority. The new emphasis on things like revelation, “pure conversation,” and various forms of commentarial approaches reveal this concern with finding new bases and sources of knowledge.⁴⁹

Wang Chong and Ge Hong, then, represent, in a sense, fish out of water. Both are trying to play the old game of being human sages, developing a new lineage of teachings by building upon the earlier teachings of sages and founding a body of knowledge that disciples would hand down. But the efforts by Wang Chong and Ge Hong to revive this earlier form of knowledge for the most part falls on deaf ears.

Conclusion

We often tend to think of Ge Hong as a religious thinker, and one who tried to justify the importance of things like the search for immortality. We also therefore tend to put him in opposition to figures like Wang Chong, who would represent a rationalist viewpoint, opposed to many of the religious practices of the day.

But here we have caught a glimpse of a different set of debates, focused on the source and nature of knowledge. On this set of questions, Ge Hong and Wang Chong are on the same side: both argue that knowledge is human, that it is derived from sages, and that, since sages are limited, it is crucial that new sages be recognized such that the accumulation of human knowledge can continue. Such a position would be in opposition to a view that sages are divine and all-knowing and can only be found in antiquity, and even more in opposition to a view that knowledge emerges from divine revelation.

For Ge Hong, the goal was to organize all of the significant strands of accumulated human knowledge – on ethics, ritual, politics, and transcendence. All of these, for Ge Hong, were a product of human sages using their endowments to provide teachings that lift humanity out of their natural lot.

In terms of the relations between humans and spirits, this entailed a strong claim as to the distinctly human aspect of knowledge: it is humans who develop knowledge and technical arts to organize human society, control the spirit world, and transform themselves to become spirits. The non-human spirits do not seem to help humans in this process. And for understandable reasons: the techniques in question allow humans, among other things, to deceive and control the spirit world. And who knows what future techniques, if the progressive accumulation continues, will allow humans to do.

In short, Ge Hong is a radically humanistic thinker, in the most literal sense of that word. For Ge Hong, humans have found themselves in a natural world of misery and death, and to better their lot they have constructed for themselves arts and practices involving everything from agriculture and the state to the achievement of transcendence. Humans have thus gone beyond all other earthly creatures, and they are already beginning to become the equal of the spirits as well. Indeed, humans are even gaining control over the spirits. For Ge Hong, humanity is slowly but surely transcending the natural world of the earthly and gaining ever more control over the heavenly realm as well.

The result of Ge Hong's project may indeed be a helpful compendium of religious practices of the day, and his overt goal in the portion of the text that is most read (the "Nei pian") is indeed to defend seekers of immortality. But, in terms of the spectrum of views of the day, Ge Hong represented an extreme pole in the debate over whether knowledge was humanly based or divinely revealed. Ge Hong was certainly defending certain practices and explicating them for posterity, but his reasons for doing so were part of a larger argument within the debates of the day. It is a great irony that such a figure's major work would ultimately come to be used as simply a compendium of practices of the day, when in all likelihood few practitioners would at all have accepted the larger argument that Ge Hong was trying to make.

NOTES

1. Yang Mingzhao ed., *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), chapter 32, p. 101. Here and throughout my discussion of Ge Hong, my translations of the *Baopuzi* have been aided greatly by those given by Jay Sailey in his *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: A Study of the Philosopher Ko Hung, A.D. 283-343* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1978); and James Ware in *Alchemy, Medicine, and Religion in the China of A. D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966).
2. My understanding of Ge Hong has been helped immeasurably by the excellent work of Robert Campany. See *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents*

- (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); “Two Religious Thinkers of the Early Eastern Jin: Gan Bao and Ge Hong in Multiple Contexts,” *Asia Major* 18.1 (2005): 175-224; “Living off the Books: Fifty Ways to Dodge *Ming* [Preallotted Lifespan] in Early Medieval China,” in Christopher Lupke ed., *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p. 129-150; “On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions* 42.4 (May 2003): 287-319; “Ingesting the Marvelous: The Practitioner’s Relationship to Nature According to Ge Hong (283-343 C.E.),” in Norman Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan eds., *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 125-147.
3. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 220.
 4. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 221.
 5. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 221.
 6. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 223.
 7. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 236.
 8. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 228.
 9. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 236.
 10. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 221.
 11. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 43, p. 425.
 12. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 37, p. 229.
 13. Wang Ming, ed., *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), chapter 3, p. 46.
 14. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 3, 46.
 15. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 4, p. 74.
 16. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 13, p. 240.
 17. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 4, p. 71.
 18. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 2, p. 21.
 19. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 2, p. 22.
 20. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 2, p. 14.
 21. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 2, p. 19-20.
 22. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 4, p. 76.
 23. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 18, p. 323.
 24. Ursula-Angelika Cedzich, “Corpse Deliverance, Substitute Bodies, Name Change, and Feigned Death: Aspects of Metamorphosis and Immortality in Early Medieval China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 29 (2001):1-68; and Campany, “Living off the Books: Fifty Ways to Dodge *Ming* [Preallotted Lifespan] in Early Medieval China.”
 25. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 12, p. 227.
 26. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 12, p. 228.
 27. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 12, p. 225.
 28. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 8, p. 155.
 29. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 4, p. 76.

30. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 12, p. 225.
31. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 3, p. 129.
32. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 3, p. 114.
33. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 3, p. 127.
34. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 30, p. 78.
35. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 4, p. 71.
36. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 5, p. 113.
37. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 5, p. 113.
38. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 32, p. 118.
39. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 30, p. 78.
40. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 32, p. 99.
41. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 43, p. 423.
42. *Lun Heng*, “Qi shi,” chapter 56, ICS 56/250/17.
43. I discuss these issues concerning Wang Chong in greater depth in my “The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of Sagely Writing in Early China,” in Wilt Idema ed., *Books in Numbers* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, forthcoming).
44. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 32, p. 101.
45. See the excellent analysis by Matthew Wells in his “Self as Historical Artifact: Ge Hong and Early Chinese Autobiography,” *Early Medieval China* 9 (2003): 71-103.
46. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 50, p. 697.
47. For a fuller discussion, see my “The Temptations of Sagehood.”
48. For a superb discussion of these materials, see Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: the Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997).
49. Puett, “The Temptations of Sagehood.”

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GLOSSARY

Baopuzi 抱朴子
cai 才
dao 道
fang 方
Ge Hong 葛洪
he 合
Huainanzi 淮南子
Huangdi 黄帝
Laozi 老子
ling 靈
Lun Heng 論衡
Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋
ming 明
“Nei pian” 內篇
ren 仁
Sanhuang neiwen 三皇內文
Shangqing 上清
shen 神
shijie 尸解
shu 術
Taiqing shendan 太清神丹
“Wai pian” 外篇
Wang Chong 王充
wen 文
xian 仙
xing 行
xun 訓
yi jia zhi yan 一家之言
Yuanjun 元君
zi yue 子曰
ziran 自然
zuo 作