

# Seeing Is Believing: Faith, Doubt and Self-Presentation in Ge Hong's *The Master Embracing Simplicity*

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The world wasn't made for us to think about  
(To think is to be sick in the eyes)  
But for us to see and agree with . . .

*Alberto Caeiro*

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars of early Chinese autobiography are confronted by the challenging fact that during the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and early medieval (220–589) periods, autobiography was not a distinct genre, but was rather present in many genres. Biographies (*zhuan*, lit. “commentary” or “transmission”), which had been firmly established as a central mode of historical discourse by Sima Qian’s (ca. 145–86 BCE) *Grand Astrologer’s Record* (*Shi ji*) and proliferated over the next few centuries, varied according to their sub-genre. Official biographies (*liezhuan*, or connected accounts), found in court histories and local histories, were concerned with transmitting to posterity didactic accounts of individual lives that supported the overarching vision of the author for the time period or local region in question. In the early medieval period, more idiosyncratic “separate accounts” (*biezhuan*) concerned themselves with displays of erudite scholarship, moral character, and anecdotes for the purposes of careerism, building reputation, and influencing the historical record. Unlike biography, autobiographical

accounts were often distortions of other genres, bent and transformed for autobiographical ends. Narrative self-expression thus assumed many guises, including narrative verse, epistolary literature, self-written necrology, tomb inscriptions written by the deceased, and authorial self-accounts.

The genre of autobiography in early China is thus largely shaped by the views of modern scholars, who imbue specific texts with autobiographical weight while rejecting others. Guo Dengfeng's pioneering work, *An Anthology of Autobiographical Postfaces and Autobiography through the Ages* (*Lidai zixu zhuan wenchao*), first published in 1937, takes the desire for self-expression and extensive biographical detail as its standard, thus combining an eclectic but limited list of texts from the early period into a single genre (Guo 1965, 2). Other studies take different approaches, attempting to wed early autobiography to the genre conventions of biography (Ng 2003, 7), or focusing on specific genres from the period such as the postface (*xu*) or authorial postface (*zixu*), which most resemble modern expectations for biography (Wu 1990, 49–67; Wells 2009, 11–12).

The genre of the authorial postface illustrates many of the issues surrounding the study of autobiography in early China. The postface formed the last chapter of a larger treatise of a philosophy, a history, or a collected works, and typically outlined the author's family history and enumerated the contents of the work or collection. The text was meant as a coda to the larger work and provided the familial, intellectual, and sometimes political context that led to its writing. In practice, autobiographical disclosure in such chapters was extremely rare; only a few texts from this period provide any discernable life narrative. Biographical details, when present, authorized the act of writing through recourse to the circumstances of the author's life. For these early Chinese autobiographers, the authenticity of both the life and the text were thus closely intertwined (Larson 1991, 15). The most ambitious examples of such texts provided enough biographical detail to push back against contemporary critics and thereby exercise some control over the content of their historical image, anticipating future biographies in historical texts (Larson 1991, 19). Thus we find autobiography within a genre in which autobiography was not the norm, but one that could be exploited for different agendas through an autobiographical turn.

Like biography, what we may readily define as autobiographical genres mingled their accounts with historical and literary allusions, archetypes, and narrative conventions that acted as a built-in hermeneutic for the reader, infusing the narrative with drama, irony, and meaning (Rogers 1968, 33). As narratives they are metaphors for individuals, summary

acts of self-creation that render life experience intelligible to the reader by means of common reference points of language and meaning (Olney 1972, 35; Cavell 1988, 115). Although the reliance of early Chinese life writing on intertextuality, allusion, and narrative conventions has disappointed those who insist on objective verisimilitude in personal accounts, for Chinese literati who wrote and read such texts, recalling exemplary historical figures such as Zhou Gong (the Duke of Zhou) or cultural exemplars such as recluses and transcendents provided the means for understanding the actions of an individual and the trajectory of their life (Wells 2009, 53).

Most problematic is the notion that biographical narrative in early China was not highly regarded as a vehicle for self-disclosure; that task was appointed to rhapsody (*fu*) and verse (*shi*), and to “masters literature” (*zishu*), lengthy treatises on philosophy, social criticism, and literary discrimination. Literati utilized such works to “speak what was on the mind” (*yan zhi*, lit. to speak of the “will”). Because a work of literary criticism or political philosophy was more than capable of capturing the essence of the author, a lengthy autobiographical narrative was not typically needed. Thus writers in early China sought to be known by contemporaries for their erudition and knowledge in order to spread their fame, acquire disciples, or find position with a local patron or at the central court; at the same time they sought to create enduring legacies by “establishing words” (*li yan*) and by creating a discourse of their own (Tian 2006, 468). The text was, in essence, an extended self through time, a work through which the author’s intentions, aspirations, and thoughts would be made known to posterity (Tian 2006, 469), often with the assistance of a (hopefully favorable) biography written by another. Modern scholars of autobiography are thus confronted with the difficult conundrum of texts intended as deeply personal expressions of the self that nevertheless lack the biographical details we associate with self-narrative.

One author of such a text was Ge Hong (283–343), a minor official during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) who is best known to modern scholars for his seminal work, the *Master Embracing Simplicity* (*Baopuzi*). Although the text has appeared in various editions and collections over the years, bibliographers from the Jin period forward have consistently ascribed sole authorship of the text to Ge Hong (Sailey 1978, 527–30). The division of the *Master Embracing Simplicity* into two parts—an *Inner Chapters* or *Neipian* devoted to esoteric techniques of divine transcendence (*xian*) and extraordinary longevity, and an *Outer Chapters* or *Waipian* concerned with political, social, and literary criticism—speaks to the ambitions of the

author, who claimed to be a sage for a new age and a master forming a new lineage of knowledge more comprehensive than what had come before. Ge Hong hoped to be regarded as a fount of sagely knowledge, both esoteric and exoteric, by contemporaries and remembered by future generations (Puett 2007, 113).

Ge Hong appended an autobiographical postface to his work and more than his predecessors he ambitiously counterpoised his postface with historiography and advanced a well-developed biographical sketch both to authorize his work and to control his historical legacy (Wells 2009, 107–19). More important for our purposes here, Ge Hong used the postface together with passages throughout the work to create a vivid literary persona, the Master Embracing Simplicity, which permeates the entire text. Thus the Master Embracing Simplicity was not only the title of the work; it was also Ge Hong's sobriquet and the first-person "I" of the text.

Ge Hong's creation of a literary persona adds an autobiographical layer to the text that is unique in this period, in which the author fashions an identity whose authenticity is based not solely on biographical details but on the possession of an efficacious body of knowledge related to achieving transcendence and extreme longevity. The Master Embracing Simplicity is not just a character who shares Ge Hong's biography; he is also the possessor of an esoteric tradition of practices that the author hopes to distinguish from the false techniques of other practitioners. Because his system of esoteric practices represented an ideal of transcendence that was available to all and based chiefly on mechanical effort and right teaching rather than endowment or divine revelation, Ge Hong faced the challenge of defending the authenticity of his techniques even though he had himself failed to achieve longevity and transcendence, a failure he explicitly admits in different points in the text (Hu 1991, 127; Lai 1998, 203; Puett 2007, 100). Rather than obfuscating this fundamental tension in his self-presentation, Ge Hong anticipates it and addresses it head-on in the guise of a fictional, skeptical interlocutor who regularly challenges Ge Hong's claims by demanding empirical, observable proof of the efficacy of his techniques, which Ge Hong is ultimately unable to provide.

Ge Hong operated within a larger community of practitioners and faithful who shared a belief in the possibility of divine transcendence and pursued their goals through recourse to teachers and textual traditions. Within this community, adepts and their communities relied on shared narratives to understand, identify, and interpret the activities of adepts as real objects of relation (Campany 2009, 148). However, passages from the *Master*

*Embracing Simplicity* in which the interlocutor successfully challenges Ge Hong's claims demonstrate that there was substantial tension between narratives of transcendence, praxis, and lived experience, which often failed to fit into the expected shared narrative. I suggest that narrative discontinuity must have frequently emerged from the process of establishing the authenticity of would-be adepts in a discourse of doubt and skepticism, a process in which both laypeople and adepts participated while leveling criticism at one another. Although Ge Hong chastises other practitioners for spurious claims to knowledge or achievements, his failure to achieve transcendence makes him vulnerable to much of the same criticism. Indeed, through the interlocutor, Ge Hong's Master Embracing Simplicity frequently faces the same charges of fraud that he aims at other practitioners. What I find the most interesting is the question of how these instances of doubt speak to the disruption of the narrative of self-representation. Put simply, how did communities of believers understand the experience of dramatic failure on the part of those who laid claim to such techniques, a failure that must have occurred with alarming regularity, and how did the adepts themselves understand it?

In Ge Hong's era this community was extremely diverse, raising the possibility of multiple audiences for Ge Hong's work. Among those who pursued transcendence were high officials, commoners, clients, patrons, imposters, solitary ascetics, organized religious communities, and literati. Practitioners listed members of official classes among their clients (Campany 2009, 37), sought teachers of esoteric knowledge regardless of station, and passed texts and oral formulae to disciples. Because no evidence exists describing the reception and circulation of the *Master Embracing Simplicity* during Ge Hong's lifetime, I reject any univocal explanation for the author's rhetorical strategies in the text. Instead, I will attempt to entertain several possibilities about why the disruption of Ge Hong's literary persona was important and how he crafted his rhetorical response, whether the text was read by potential clients, patrons, disciples, or future readers, for all of whom the question of authenticity and efficacy would have been important.

This essay addresses these questions by exploring different articulations of doubt in Ge Hong's *Inner Chapters to the Master Embracing Simplicity*. The paper first discusses the intellectual and literary context of Ge Hong's interlocutor by examining arguments against transcendence from two influential predecessors, that of Wang Chong's (27–91 CE) *Arguments Weighed in the Balance* (*Lun heng*) and the third-century epistolary debate

between Xi Kang (223–263) and Xiang Xiu (ca. 221–ca. 300). These two works reveal a sophisticated skeptical discourse during the Han and early medieval periods that sought to refute the existence of transcendence and extreme longevity through recourse to textual tradition, established arguments borrowed from earlier sources, and demanded proof in the form of empirical observation. The doubts of these earlier skeptical arguments crystallized in Ge Hong's *Inner Chapters* as instructions to seekers of transcendence in both how to shun skeptics of the process, which could endanger the adept's success, and how to avoid false teachers and practitioners, who could instill doubt in the adept's own mind. However, by attempting to undermine his claims to be the scion of an authentic tradition of esoteric knowledge and longevity practices and thereby destabilizing his authorial self-presentation within the text, the skeptical interlocutor of the *Master Embracing Simplicity* posed a unique challenge to Ge Hong not found in earlier texts. The overlapping rhetorical dimensions of such doubts within the text are the primary focus of this essay, rather than the intriguing but ultimately unanswerable question of whether Ge Hong really harbored deep doubts about his own lineage and techniques.

If Ge Hong had been able to employ different forms of textual or technical authority to overcome the interlocutor's challenge, this essay would naturally explore the rhetoric of authority in Ge Hong's writing and analyze his rebuttals to counter-authorities within a shared discourse of longevity and transcendence. Such a study might focus on the obvious formal function of the interlocutor in providing Ge Hong with opportunities to extend his arguments. This rhetorical function is particularly pronounced in chapter six, "The Meaning of Subtlety" (Wei zhi), in which the interlocutor asks a series of leading questions that affirm rather than challenge the author's basic suppositions. However, in the passages I examine, Ge Hong, in the guise of the Master Embracing Simplicity, ascribes a rigorous logic, emphasis on empirical observation, and scathing skepticism to his ideological opponents. These moments of interlocution pose a devastating assault on the notion of transcendence and longevity, one for which Ge Hong at times has no satisfactory rebuttal. In this essay I argue that these instances of rhetorical failure and his admissions that he is unable to achieve transcendence ironically play an important role in salvaging the credibility of Ge Hong's self-presentation within the text and thereby serves to reify his literary authority as an author. As I contend in this essay, it is only by highlighting his failure through skepticism and persistent doubt that Ge Hong is able to fashion a lasting self-presentation.

### DOUBT AND SKEPTICISM AS TERMS OF INQUIRY

Although the doubts of Ge Hong's fictitious interlocutor provide some insight into arguments against transcendence in early China, it should be stressed at the outset that such passages from the *Master Embracing Simplicity* and other early texts do not suggest the utter rejection of what could be considered religious modes of thinking or represent the denial of the existence of supernormal phenomena. Such radical, dogmatic atheism and agnosticism are not evident in arguments against extreme longevity and transcendence in China from this early period, nor is it typical of skepticism from the Western tradition, in which most skeptical thinkers asserted a sincere religious faith, and "skeptic" and "believer" were not opposing classifications (Popkin 2003, xxi). Skeptical argumentation in both traditions was most often typified by what Richard Popkin describes as "fideism," the idea that real knowledge about the world was assumed to begin by accepting some basic premises on faith (Popkin 2003, xxii). In early China, although disputants focused on questions of empirical proof and textual evidence, they also frequently defended competing or similar supernormal claims.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the doubts expressed in these arguments are not suggestive of a strong skeptical position typical of Academic skeptics of the Greek tradition. These early skeptics considered the senses to be untrustworthy and easily fooled; implying that knowledge of the external world is always uncertain and even our best information about the world is merely probable (Cheng 1977, 139; Popkin 2003, xviii). This type of skeptical argument occurs only once in the *Master Embracing Simplicity*. In response to the interlocutor's assertion that ancient sages had investigated the existence of many phenomena but had never mentioned the possibility of prolonging life or becoming transcendent, Ge Hong replies,

Now of those who hear sounds, there is none who does not trust their own ears in this. Of those who perceive physical forms, there is none who does not trust his own eyes in this. But sometimes that which we hear or see appears true but is false, thus one's eyes and ears in the end are not sufficient for believing (Chen 2001, 179; Ware 1966, 133).

In this singular instance, Ge Hong replies to the doubts of the interlocutor with his own skeptical argument, implying that the senses are not sufficient criteria for belief in immortals.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, this argument is not representative of the more typical reliance on empirical observation and

textual evidence found in the rest of the *Master Embracing Simplicity*, both on the part of Ge Hong and the fictional interlocutor, but it illustrates the way in which empirical and textual claims regarding transcendentals and longevity practices—and the reliance on eyewitness accounts as evidence that we see in the rest of the text—would have little value as proof for the Academic skeptic.

The dogmatic nature of the arguments for and against transcendence also belies the notion that we are witnessing in Ge Hong's work the kind of skepticism employed for the Pyrrhonian purpose of *ataraxia*, or quietude, in order to navigate between rigid philosophical positions (Popkin 2003, xix). According to Jay Garfield, such skepticism may be employed as “philosophical therapy” that embraces convention while suspending judgment about knowledge claims in order to avoid dogmatic extremes (Garfield 1990, 293). Instead, what is at stake in these early Chinese arguments is nothing less than the existence of transcendentals who enjoy extraordinary longevity of life and the efficacy of techniques of transcendence, and there is little regard for these concepts as mere objects of discourse and no expressed desire to strike a balance between the two positions.

Arguments against transcendence and longevity from early China also emerged within the context of other truth claims that are found to be similarly lacking in empirical proof. For example, Ge Hong's interlocutor sees no contradiction between his challenge to Ge Hong's belief in transcendence and acceptance of the extraordinary longevity of mythical figures such as Pengzu, often referred to as the “Chinese Methuselah” (Chen 2001, 522; Ware 1966, 217).<sup>3</sup> Thus, although the doubts of the interlocutor may employ a skeptical methodology, he proceeds from metaphysical assumptions and beliefs that are very similar to those who believe longevity and transcendence is possible to achieve and frequently agrees with Ge Hong on many other issues, asking rhetorical questions that beg exposition. More challenging are the pointed doubts raised by the interlocutor about Ge Hong's claims to understand the processes for producing elixirs of transcendence, doubts that emphasize empirical, observable evidence for Ge Hong's knowledge in the form of his own transcendence.

### GE HONG'S ANTECEDENTS

The interlocutor's challenge to Ge Hong's claims and his emphasis on empirical observation as evidence have at least two important precedents from the Eastern Han (25–220) and Three Kingdoms (220–65) periods, the work

of Wang Chong and the epistolary debate between Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu. Because early medieval Chinese literati wrote within a flourishing literary culture that assumed intertextuality and Ge Hong frequently mentions these earlier authors in his work, we must assume these arguments and debates were known to Ge Hong at the time he composed his own work. The most well-known argument against extraordinary longevity and transcendence from this period is that of Wang Chong, who devotes chapter 24 of his *Arguments Weighed in the Balance* entitled “Daoist Untruths” (Dao xu) to debunking lore associated with various Daoist traditions of the 1st century. According to Michael Nylan, like much of Wang Chong’s work, “Daoist Untruths” frequently devolves into factual nitpicking and a rhetorical game of inches; factual order and consistency reign supreme in Wang’s worldview, in which inconsistency is regarded as a cardinal sin (Nylan 1997, 144–45).<sup>4</sup> His singular focus on consistency extends even to arguments about physical forms and their relevance to transcendence:

Now people are but creatures, although precious as nobility, their nature is not different from [other] creatures. [Among] creatures there is none that does not die. How are people alone able to become transcendent? Birds have plumes and feathers and so are able to fly but not able to fly to heaven. People have no plumes or feathers, what can they use to fly? If [they] could be made to have plumes and feathers, they would only be equal to birds; since they have none, how would they ascend to heaven? In the case of creatures who are able to fly, they are born with feathers and plumes; creatures who are able to run swiftly, are born with hooves and feet. Swift running [creatures] are not able to fly, and flying [creatures] are not able to run swiftly. The differences among physical forms are due to natural dispositions and allotted *qi*. The natural disposition of people today is to be fleet of foot, therefore they are born without plumes and feathers, from maturity to old age, [in the end no miracle will grant them to a person]. If among those who were fond of the Way and studied [the techniques] of transcendence [a person] was born with plumes and feathers, then eventually he might thus fly. (Forke 1962, 1:336; Wang 1996, 318)

Wang Chong’s objections here are not to the concept of transcendence as a phenomenon but, rather, to the reality of certain activities supposedly undertaken by immortals such as flight or ascension to the heavens. The argument is made by analogy and informed by rigorous logical consistency;

because people do not share the characteristics of flying creatures such as plumage, feathers, and wings, they cannot undertake the activities of that class of thing (Forke 1962, 1:339; Wang 1996, 324).<sup>5</sup> Wang freely admits that some creatures do transform, such as toads changing into quails, which was a commonly held assumption of the era, but this transformation occurs according to their natural endowment and not artificial means such as techniques of extreme longevity (Forke 1962, 1: 336; Wang 1996, 318). Because humans presumably do not share the transformative power of toads, we may not change kinds in the same manner.

Wang Chong's argument becomes more interesting when he turns to Li Shaojun, the legendary "master of methods" (*fangshi*) of Emperor Wu's (r. 141–87 BCE) court during the early Han Dynasty. Because Wang Chong bases his account entirely on Sima Qian's *Grand Astrologer's Record* fascicle (*juan*) 12, "Basic Annals of Filial Emperor Wu," and fascicle 28, "Book of Feng and Shan Sacrifices," he also adopts the skeptical tone of the early Han historian. Wang, paraphrasing Sima Qian, asserts that Li died of illness, although many subsequently assumed he did not die but had become immortal and departed through the method of "corpse liberation" (Forke 1962, 1:344; Wang 1996, 331). Wang Chong then asks, "Of those who may be said to have undergone 'corpse liberation,' how is that understood?"

Would we say it could mean the body dies and the spirit departs? Would we say it could be when the body does not die but sheds its skin [like an insect]? If we say it could mean that the body dies and the spirit departs, this is no different than death itself, and all people are thus immortal! If we say it could be that the body does not die but sheds its skin, but students of the Way who have died leave behind bones and flesh, then this is thus no different than an ordinary dead body. (Forke 1962, 1:344; Wang 1996, 331).

Here Wang Chong cleverly dissects what must have been a frequent point of friction between believers and skeptics: the meaning of the adept's death and the rationale for why the allegedly departed adept would leave behind a corpse. If it is true that the adept sheds the body but escapes in spirit, then this kind of "transcendence" is simply death by another name. Even more difficult to understand is the idea that the adept sheds his or her old body like a shell; if this is so, why does the discarded shell have flesh and bones and resemble a normal dead body? Invoking once again his iron law of consistency, Wang reasons this cannot be, as such a discarded body does

not resemble the shells and skins of other animals that shed their exteriors such as the cicada or the snake (Wang 1996, 331; Forke 1962, 1:344). As we shall see, this line of reasoning foreshadows the doubts of Ge Hong's interlocutor by suggesting tension existed between narratives of transcendence, the lived experiences of adepts, and accounts of those who observed their practices, and, in many cases, witnessed their untimely deaths.

Wang Chong's ultimate concern lies in the consistency of sources and the arguments of his opponents, even to the point of temporarily adopting their perspectives in order to pile on inconsistencies. Wang Chong is less interested in presenting his doubts in a coherent form than in demolishing all available arguments by weighing them together. However, he does not adopt a skeptical tone toward all unnatural phenomena or even regard his doubts about extraordinary longevity and his assertion that toads may transform into quails as contradictory in any way. In short, we are not viewing any kind of systematic use of skeptical methodology but, instead, doubts expressed from within a discourse that readily accepts other unproven assertions and supernormal objects. At times, Wang's arguments do imply the importance of eyewitness accounts and flirt with the notion of empirical proof, but ultimately these arguments emphasize the notion of consistency above all else, be it in regard to textual evidence, the natural world, or personal experience.

The debate between Xiang Xiu and Xi Kang over longevity, consisting of Xi's "Essay on Nourishing Life" (Yangsheng lun) and Xiang's reply, "Refutation to the Essay on Nourishing Life" (Nan Yangsheng lun), is an important precedent for the refutations of Ge Hong's interlocutor for several reasons. Like that of Ge Hong and his fictional interlocutor, the debate between Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu frequently turns to the related problems of doubt and evidence. Whereas Wang Chong's chapter challenges an array of beliefs related to Han esoteric practice and Daoism, Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu's debate takes place in the context of a dialogue, albeit one in epistolary guise. Their exchange also focuses more keenly on practices traditionally associated with masters of methods like Li Shaojun and was largely unconcerned with specific details of sectarian "Daoism" as it existed at the time. Xiang Xiu was also an older contemporary of Ge Hong who became closely associated with the Daoist canon through his influential but largely lost commentary on the *Zhuangzi*. Finally, the essay of Xiang Xiu's ideological opponent, Xi Kang, was extremely well known and highly prized for its content and style, even by Wang Dao (276–339), who according to the fifth-century *New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu*) was quite fond of the work (Henricks 1983,

22; Liu 1999, 114). Wang Dao would later exert his influence over Ge Hong's official career (Wells 2009, 75). Xi Kang's grandnephew, Xi Han, would also briefly employ Ge Hong before his untimely death around 306. Such a well-known exchange by two high-profile literati about the limits of human longevity must be assumed to have had an influence on Ge Hong's work. This debate appears to draw a distinction between transcendence, which results from a unique, natural endowment of "special breath," and extraordinary longevity, which is achieved through techniques such as imbibing elixirs and performing other esoteric practices (Henricks 1983, 23).<sup>6</sup> The discussion thus revolves around defending the possibility of acquiring extreme longevity; there is no substantive discussion of transcendence as such, because it is accepted as fact, however rare an occurrence it may be.

The closely related issues of doubt and evidence play a central role in the debate between Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu. Both men use citations from classic texts and quasi-historical examples to reinforce their opinions, but at times they adopt a more empirical perspective and make arguments based on personal or common experience. For example, in arguing for the life-extending properties of a moderate lifestyle, Xi Kang makes the common-sense observation that those who indulge themselves to excess bring about fatigue and exhaustion and live shorter lives (Henricks 1983, 26). The introduction of empirical, personal experience thus plays a more central role here than it did in Wang Chong's more theoretical dismantling of textual sources. Empirical experience becomes more problematic when it fails to support the argument. Xi Kang foregrounds this issue in the opening lines of his essay, stating, "Although immortals are not seen with the eyes, nonetheless they are cited in books and records and [their lives] are narrated in the former histories" (Henricks 1983, 22). In the context of Xi Kang's essay, a lack of empirical experience or contradictory evidence may be allayed by textual authority, but for the practitioner, empirical doubts are more difficult to overcome.

According to Xi Kang's essay, doubt emerges as a key obstacle to the practitioner, whose skepticism may cause problems at the outset; "even if they have heard of the business of nourishing life, limited to what they can see, they say it is not true" (Henricks 1983, 27). Doubt may also cause difficulties in the future when practitioners fail to see results after an extended period of practice and simply abandon their pursuit (Henricks 1983, 28). Here the friction between the narrative of transcendence and lived experience again comes to the fore. How are practitioners to understand their pursuit of extraordinary longevity when results are not forthcoming? In

*Arguments Weighed in the Balance*, this issue remained largely academic, but as someone who advocates for the efficacy of such practices, Xi Kang recognizes that such tension has the potential to create considerable problems for would-be practitioners. Such doubts, grounded in empirical experience, will cause most seekers to abandon their faith in the process. Xiang Xiu highlights this problem in his response:

If it truly could be this way, then there must be those who have done it. Where are these people? My eyes have never seen them. I am afraid these are nothing but rumors; they can be talked about, but they cannot be found. (Henricks 1983, 35)

While Xiang is willing to concede that some people may indeed live for a very long time, he explains that this is due to their natural endowment and not through acquired knowledge or special techniques (Henricks 1983, 35).

In the essays and letters of Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu, textual evidence and empirical knowledge serve a broader argument about human nature. According to Xiang Xiu, Xi Kang's emphasis on social withdrawal, rejection of certain foods, and elimination of emotional investments for the sake of longevity run counter to human nature; "the natural order and the abiding ways of man [are such that] things pleasant and agreeable please the mind, and honor and glory delight the will" (Henricks 1983, 36). Quoting the Han dynasty poet and scholar Sima Xiangru's (179–117 BCE) "Rhapsody on the Great Man (Da ren fu), Xiang concludes by stating that a long life that violates human nature is not worth the effort (Henricks 1983, 37). Xi Kang's rebuttal to Xiang's reply is almost entirely concerned with demonstrating the superiority of quietism and social withdrawal over political position and social engagement. "Wealth and rank mean much injury; the things that attack you are many. Rustics enjoy great age; the things that can harm them are few" (Henricks 1983, 51). For Xi Kang, the social-political realm is anathema to longevity and should be avoided by anyone seeking long life. Given Xi's own social and political conflicts, which led ultimately to his execution, his letter in reply to Xiang conveys the heavy subtext of a doomed figure seeking to avoid the inevitable.

### **YOU CAN'T HAVE IT ALL: DOUBT AND SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS**

The doubts of nonbelievers seen in Wang Chong, Xi Kang, and Xiang Xiu's works are also present in the *Inner Chapters*, but for Ge Hong, the skepticism of others translated into practical considerations of the individual

adept's lifestyle and assessments of whether it was conducive to the pursuit of longevity, which often called for rituals, diets, and other practices that lay beyond normative social behaviors. Such practices frequently called for ritual periods of social isolation or in some cases suggested a need for complete withdrawal from social ties such as family and occupation. For this reason, chief among the considerations of any would-be adept was the problem of his or her relationship to larger social units such as family, court, or society, particularly when people in close quarters denigrated or doubted the adept's pursuit of longevity.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Xi Kang, Ge Hong is at best ambivalent on the subject of social renunciation and its effects on immortality practices, though some passages within the *Master Embracing Simplicity* would appear to advocate for social withdrawal as a prerequisite to successful practice of even the most basic techniques. For example, in the chapter "Gold and Silver" (Huang bai), Ge Hong recounts how Metropolitan Superintendent Wu Dawen of Chengdu studied under one Li Gen and witnessed the process for manufacturing silver.<sup>8</sup> However, Wu could never replicate the process because he could not get away from his official duties long enough to fulfill the requisite 100-day purity ritual. Ever after he "always sighed and said that the world of men was an unworthy place to dwell" (Chen 2001, 636; Ware 1966, 264). Regarding more complex processes such as compounding "divine cinnabar," Ge Hong writes,

Moreover the technique for manufacturing gold and silver<sup>9</sup> is identical to that of elixirs of transcendence, both require fasting and purification for at least one hundred days. Also one should find a likeminded person who deeply understands the literature of alchemy before the prescription can be compounded, [but] the morally reprehensible, unintelligent, or those with little experience are not among those who can accomplish this. Certain matters can only be transmitted orally, and must be learned from a teacher. Also, you should go deep into the mountains, to a pure spot, so that vulgar [non-believers] will not know what you are undertaking. But Liu Xiang [77–6 BCE] remained in the palace when he attempted it and was served by palace attendants while not maintaining the requisite purity. Also he maintained his involvement in human affairs so there were constant comings and goings. With a situation like this, how could he achieve success (Chen 2001, 641; Ware 1966, 266)?

We may observe that in Ge Hong's view, Liu Xiang seemed hamstrung by his persistent involvement in court affairs and his proximity to court. Indeed, Ge Hong argues in the chapter "Countering Objections" (Sai nan) that the difficulties of Daoism include "abandonment of social interaction, renouncing wife and family, rejection of fame, and loss of income" (Chen 2001, 272; Ware 1966, 130). At one point in the chapter "Gold and Cinnabar" (Jin dan), he goes so far as to say that he has broken off contact with his native village and abandoned everything in search of elixirs, saying, "The Dao does not arise in concert with mundane activity" (Chen 2001, 174; Ware 1966, 95).

However, Ge Hong's definition of *Dao* appears to have differed from many of his contemporaries, especially large, organized faiths such as the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao), which did not require the renunciation of social and familial ties. Here Ge Hong seems to use the term as shorthand for concerns and practices more akin to those of Han-period masters of esoteric methods, rather than as a reference to organized communities of faithful. In this regard, his focus on esoteric methods of longevity more closely resembles the exchange between Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu than it speaks to a defense of contemporary faith communities.

Despite Ge Hong's passing claims to the contrary, he appears to have rejected the notion that such esoteric practices precluded the adept's participation in social and political life. Countering objections to the idea that the process will lead people away from society, he argues in "Resolving Obstructions" (Shi zhi) that

[if] one who is greatly talented is able simultaneously to cultivate [transcendence and human affairs], what objection could there be? [Such a person would] inwardly treasure the way of nurturing life and outwardly swim with the tide of the world, [he would] regulate himself and he would meet with success, administer the state and the state would enter a period of great peace. (Chen 2001, 286; Ware 1966, 136)

Following this assertion is a lengthy list of practitioners from ancient times, including Laozi and Pengzu, who according to Ge Hong both served in office and enjoyed the benefits of longevity practice:

Many of the Ancients attained the Dao and continued to work at public office, they practiced it as recluses at court, presumably for the reason that they had an excess of energy. Why is it necessary to

practice [techniques of longevity] in the mountains and forests, and achieve [success] only after completely abandoning worldly affairs? (Chen 2001, 288; Ware 1966, 137)

Thus it appears that the divine process may be pursued on the periphery of court life by one who is able to manage his social and political duties wisely, using his excess of energy to apply himself both to his official duties and to the divine process while maintaining the necessary level of ritual purity. Once achieved, a practitioner may continue to maintain his social and political duties as he experiences the benefits of the divine process. Statements such as these add political and social dimensions to Ge Hong's "Earth Immortal," which, while not the highest state one could achieve, was certainly among the most desirable (Lai 1998, 206).

From a sociological perspective, Ge Hong's attempt to reconcile religious practice with social and political life may be explained by Hu Fuchen's analysis of pre-Han- and Han-era longevity practice, the depictions of which catered to the elite tastes of China's ruling and upper classes. According to Hu, in an effort to gain converts, most religions tend to affirm the desires of people rather than reject them. Religious institutions that abnegate elite desires and tastes may have a difficult time entering elite discourse and gaining adherents. Thus, argues Hu, the elite longevity practices of the Eastern Han was not an ascetic practice, but one that fully satisfied elite desires for enduring life, power, and opulence, as well as promising their fulfillment after some fashion (1991, 128–29). Following Hu's logic, Ge Hong may be addressing the elites he hoped to impress by suggesting that they may successfully practice longevity or transcendence processes without relinquishing their social and political standing, thus broadening the appeal of his knowledge and techniques among a potential pool of clients and patrons. Ge Hong's persistent connections with government officials such as his father-in-law, Bao Jing, the governor of Nanhai, even during his early retirement (approximately 306–318) and his eventual employment in Wang Dao's administration, whose interest in longevity and transcendence was well known, suggest that he may have sought the attention of elite officials for the purpose of employment or acquiring clients and pitched his model of transcendence accordingly (Wells 2009, 75–76).

From a philosophical and religious perspective, the roots of the imperative to avoid social and political entanglements may lie chiefly in the need to avoid nonbelievers, lest they disrupt the ritual purity of the adept or

through their disbelief cause doubt in the practitioner's mind. Such injunctions are common enough in Daoist ritual texts from the Daoist Canon (*Dao zang*). According to the passage above, Ge Hong argues that Liu Xiang's mistake was his failure to go to the mountains where "the vulgar" would not know of his activities. Instead, he remained at the palace and forfeited the "requisite purity" by allowing the palace staff to attend to his wants while maintaining an involvement in "human affairs."

Along with other passages from the text, this emphasis upon the vulgar and unlearned implies that they may play a special role in disrupting the adept's process of concocting elixirs of longevity. First, doubters sap the motivation of seekers of transcendence. Belief in the process fulfills a basic need of providing motivation for study. As Ge Hong makes clear, if one is fixated on the material world and does not believe in the divine process enough to mount an effort, then no amount of time and wealth will lead to the creation of the elixirs of long life. However, as he explains in the chapter "Gold and Cinnabar," those with the wealth to purchase ingredients should at least try, as the process may afford them with a few hundred more years of life for their efforts (Chen 2001, 132; Ware 1966, 74).

According to the chapter, "Disputations and Questions" (*Bian wen*), of greatest concern for wealthy practitioners is the scorn and slander that endangers their efforts when faced with nonbelievers; "since it is impossible to transform [doubters] and make them believers, one would only bring derision and speedy slander" (Chen 2001, 488; Ware 1966, 205). Therefore, the practitioner "follows different roads than worldly people" in order to "avoid the shocks of annoyance" delivered by doubters (Chen 2001, 488; Ware 1966, 205). Thus not only is belief a crucial ingredient for processing elixirs of longevity—despite Ge Hong's insistence elsewhere that the process is mechanical and based chiefly in diligent study with a good teacher—but the role of the "unlearned" in this analysis also seems particularly disruptive. However, overcoming the doubts of nonbelievers and setting one's sights on the process is only the first stage of the process. More important is the quest to find the right teacher.

### FALSE TEACHERS

With his focus on study and his assertion of the universal possibility of transcendence, finding a knowledgeable teacher is central to Ge Hong's system, which made charlatans masquerading as teachers of esoteric techniques a major obstacle to the success of any would-be adepts as well as one of the principal reasons for doubts about transcendence among the lay

population and the adepts themselves. The arcane nature of the alchemical process raises the stakes for finding a teacher who can guide the adept to the proper ingredients and the techniques for compounding them. Ge Hong illustrates this point in chapter sixteen, “Gold and Silver” by providing a list of ingredients for medicines recorded in manuals that bear the same name as commonly used items but in reality are far different and asks, when even among these common plants there are those we do not know, “how can we expect to comprehend abstruse, secret prescriptions” (Chen 2001, 651; Ware 1966, 271).

To Ge Hong, the most alarming aspect of these false teachers and charlatans was not their spurious claims to esoteric knowledge and practices but rather, the great fame and reputation they cultivated for their own aggrandizement. These swindlers were highly skilled at deceiving both the general populace and seekers of longevity and may even have parlayed expertise in some other esoteric art into a reputation for possessing knowledge of longevity techniques. One such example cited by Ge Hong was a certain Gu Qiang, known to Ge Hong’s erstwhile employer and benefactor, Xi Han. At the age of eighty, Gu Qiang seemed hearty and hale and cultivated an air of lofty detachment through his odd mannerisms and stories in which he insinuated his mastery of techniques of longevity. The populace regarded him as a true practitioner of the arts of longevity, yet as time wore on, Gu’s memory began to fail him and he subsequently died. Most startling is Ge Hong’s assertion that skeptics subsequently broke into Gu Qiang’s coffin to verify the presence of the corpse to dispel rumors that Gu had transcended. Ge Hong concludes that such charlatans are responsible for the commonly held assumption that there are no immortals (Chen 2001, 808; Ware 1966, 324). It was imperative, therefore, that seekers of transcendence distinguish knowledgeable teachers from the multitude of imposters that seemed to populate the religious landscape of early medieval China.

The real problem with such hucksters, according to the chapter “Seek Diligently” (Qin qiu), was not only that they misled hapless students, but that they did lasting damage to the reputation of all practitioners and cultivated doubt in future seekers of longevity (Chen 2001, 579–80; Ware 1966, 241–42). For Ge Hong, this concern lies at the heart of the *Master Embracing Simplicity* and constitutes its ostensible central purpose: to be a guide for future students in their study of longevity practices:

Those ancients who wrote texts about the *Dao* were numerous, and there were none who do not strive to employ flashy and clever language in

order to exalt their hollow intentions, but none investigate and discuss the steps on the path of long life, curing the maladies of the way [toward the goal], but I am like one who labors diligently after this fashion. Truly I want to cause those who are lost to know the way back, so that despite losing their way in the beginning they may yet attain their goal, for it is better to extend a lifeline to one who has fallen into a well than to drown along with him. (Chen 2001, 579–80; Ware 1966, 241)

Ge Hong's dismissal of ancient textual authority in favor of his own writing distinguishes his work from Han authors, but it is consistent with his argument in the *Outer Chapters* that the writings of his own time surpass those of earlier ages (Yang 1997, 65–79). Ge Hong also claims in "Gold and Silver" that the *Inner Chapters* not only surpasses the texts of his predecessors but also plays the additional role of surrogate teacher for future students, offering an ostensibly logical reason for writing an extensive treatise in an esoteric tradition that extolled the necessity of receiving correct oral instruction (Chen, 2001, 641; Ware 1966, 266). According to Ge Hong, the deceptive practices of would-be adepts and charlatans make a textual substitute necessary until a proper master of esoteric methods may be found, for it provides the student with the means to evaluate potential teachers and identify those in whom they should place their confidence (Chen 2001, 579; Ware 1966, 241.).

This is the central premise of the final chapter of the text, "Dispelling Doubts" (*Qu huo*), which serves as a coda to the entire work. Stressing hard work and dedication, the chapter emphasizes the role of the good teacher, who is ultimately the key ingredient of successful alchemical practice:

Indeed, the teacher that you need must necessarily be deeply [knowledgeable] and broadly [learned], as if you are crossing the ocean and ladling water, or going to [the forest of] Changlin to cut trees. The only uncertainty should be that your own strength might fail, how could one be concerned about the lack of material? (Chen 2001, 792; Ware 1966, 318.)

But discovering such a person is not so simple, for in typically mystical fashion, not all is as it seems on the surface; "a white stone may resemble jade, an illicit toady may resemble a sage. Those who are sages to an even greater degree conceal their ability, his possession will seem as if lacking, self-seeking people to an even greater degree will show off, his emptiness will seem

substantial, and without the utmost clarity, how can they be told apart” (Chen 2001, 794; Ware 1966, 319)? Doubt, on the part of the practitioner and among the lay population, is thus in part a product of false teachings that lead to misdirection, failure, and a general denigration of the practice. Although doubt may be allayed by the right teacher, charlatans and imposters make determining a teacher’s authenticity problematic. In attempting to remedy this situation, Ge Hong fells his competition with a single stroke, for he establishes his own work to be not only the summation of tradition but also the signpost by which future seekers of transcendence may identify teachers of the correct lineage. By seizing the authority to reject the traditions and practices of his contemporaries, he claims a distinct advantage in the competition for patronage and opportunity and reifies the authority of his own text by distinguishing it from other teachers of his era.

Descriptions of false practitioners who have misled students and lay people, such as the aforementioned Gu Qiang, dominate this final chapter and provide cautionary tales for adepts. These instances may be divided into two sorts: would-be practitioners who willfully deceive the public by making false claims, only to be discovered later after some failure, and seekers of transcendence who fail to achieve their goals out of ignorance of the proper techniques. Ge Hong’s proof in either instance is essentially empirical and therefore closely resembles other skeptical arguments against transcendence as he is chiefly interested in the demonstrable failure of the false practitioners. Having failed to achieve their goal, charlatans and misguided practitioners bear no signs of transcendence, or, in the example of Gu Qiang, they simply die. In some cases, their stories may contain a grain of truth, making them that much more difficult to dispel. Indeed we may observe that these imposters seemed well versed in the tropes and narratives of longevity practice, including descriptions of specific immortal figures, fantastic regions, and dietary or ritual practices. Ge Hong is offering not only the knowledge needed to produce divine elixirs but also the means of identifying those who have it. This claim puts Ge Hong in a difficult position that he must address, for like Gu Qiang, his own failure to manufacture elixirs of transcendence offers the same empirical basis for doubt about the efficacy of the process itself.

### **DOUBT AND SELF-PRESENTATION IN GE HONG’S PRACTICE**

Ge Hong’s discussion of false teachers demonstrates how adepts participated in a discourse of empirical evidence and observable proof regarding the truth claims of their competitors. When coupled with his persistent

failure in his own terms and by his own professed standards, his vision of the process as one that requires esoteric teachings and correct practice raises several troubling issues concerning the efficacy of his knowledge that he addresses through the voice of the interlocutor. We might expect Ge Hong to resort to obfuscation when presented with such serious challenges to his authenticity, for if it is true that “sages to an even greater degree conceal their ability,” then Ge Hong might easily claim his apparent lack of success is simply a case of well-concealed ability. More importantly, challenges to the efficacy of his body of knowledge require him to articulate the differences between himself and the charlatans and imposters whom he spends considerable time criticizing. However, Ge Hong addresses these issues with a surprising level of candor and, in a very creative fashion, turns these doubts and his failures to his advantage.

The majority of the passages in which the interlocutor expresses doubts about Ge Hong’s claims to the attainability of transcendence recall arguments found in Wang Chong and the debate between Xi Kang and Xiang Xiu. Wang Chong’s insistence on consistency emerges in several places in the *Master Embracing Simplicity*, as the interlocutor argues that because human beings do not share the tortoise’s ability to hibernate and the crane’s ability to fly, they are unlikely to share their assumed longevity. Ge Hong easily brushes aside this argument early in the *Inner Chapters* in “Responding to Popular Conceptions” (Dui su), simply stating that that the tortoise and the crane are essentially metaphors and need not be one’s only model for longevity (Chen 2001, 91–95; Ware 1966, 58–59). However, empirical challenges of the kind seen in Xiang Xiu’s rebuttals to Xi Kang’s essay are more difficult to cast aside. Like Xiang Xiu, the interlocutor demands tangible evidence for supernormal claims, at one point stating, “With regards to the longevity of the tortoise and the crane, perhaps it is the empty talk of the world. Who has accompanied them from birth to death and verified [their longevity] for certain?” Ge Hong side-steps the issue of empirical proof by quoting passages about ancient animals from *Yuce ji*, a Han-era text no longer extant (Chen 2001, 84; Ware 1966, 55).

Ge Hong answers other empirical challenges through recourse to his literary persona, a master of esoteric methods who has yet to achieve his goal of immortal transcendence. In some cases, the interlocutor simply asks Ge Hong to produce the evidence, demanding to know in “On Transcendence” (Lun xian) where one can obtain uncanny recipes “able to cause those who have become old to return to youth and those who should die to return to life” (Chen 2001, 24; Ware 1966, 35)? In several

other instances, such as in “Gold and Cinnabar,” the interlocutor argues that the absence of evidence is the evidence of absence, claiming that such phenomena would surely be recorded by past *Ru* (often rendered as “Confucian”) sages who have “already investigated in great measure that which exists or does not exist, but there have been none who say that one’s years can be extended and transcendence is attainable” (Chen 2001, 176; Ware 1966, 131). Both of these examples depict the interlocutor directly challenging the claims of Ge Hong literary persona: in the first case his possession of alchemical elixirs and in the second pitting him against the Han canon. In these instances Ge Hong’s reply is in keeping with his literary character. In “Countering Objections,” he laments his failure to obtain the transcendence he seeks and the amount of time he has wasted attempting to persuade others of the reality of transcendence (Chen 2001, 281; Ware 1966, 134). He even goes so far in “On Transcendence” as to imply that his will is not strong enough to overcome a desire for the comforts of the familiar, stating that even were one to obtain esoteric formulas or encounter an uncommon teacher “still regretfully [one would remain] with [one’s] old wife and children . . . knowing long life can be achieved but unable to cultivate [it]” (Chen 2001, 56; Ware 1966, 45). The passages reflect a vivid, well drawn portrayal of a practitioner who is at once intellectually isolated in his beliefs but bound by social and familial conventions that preclude his success.

Ge Hong’s self-presentation is made all the more remarkable by his claim to possess many crucial elements for achieving transcendence, chief among them being an authentic teacher. Throughout the *Master Embracing Simplicity* but particularly in those chapters dealing with esoteric recipes such as “Gold and Silver,” Ge Hong frequently refers to his teacher, Zheng Yin, as one who not only possessed the true techniques of the divine process but also transmitted these esoteric teachings to Ge Hong, who claims to have been the only recipient of specific texts and certain kinds of esoteric instruction (Chen 2001, 629; Ware 1966, 261). Moreover, Ge Hong describes his great-uncle and his teacher’s teacher, Ge Xuan, as a man who possessed many miraculous techniques, including the ability to hold his breath for one thousand respirations and remain underwater for more than a day, and would later memorialize him as a transcendent in a work of hagiography, *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (*Shenxian zhuan*) (Chen 2001, 716; Ware 1966, 297). In this way, Ge Hong imbues his own lineage with profound weight, arguing for both its accuracy and efficacy, which forms the core of his own legitimacy and the authenticity of his self-presentation.

He is thus at pains to explain his own failures in light of his many advantages. If he wishes to succeed in establishing his discourse, then he must expound upon the reliability of his own techniques, lineage, and beliefs. Yet he is clearly unsuccessful in carrying out these same techniques. In “The Meaning of Subtle” we read:

The Interlocutor reproached [him] stating: Your body does not possess irregular lineaments or strange hairs covering your frame. You have not reached the age of An Qi<sup>10</sup> or Pengzu. Your eyes have never set upon a Transcendent, nor have you uniquely heard strange speech, so how do you know that transcendence is achievable or that there is any sign of life being nurtured? If you feel that [you are conscious of] the abstruse in your mind, or your sight alone may view transcendence, then it may not be substantiated. Your clothes don't cover your own skin, and your livelihood is insufficient for a night's grain, yet you talk highly of the arts of [wealthy men such as] Tao Zhu<sup>11</sup> and associate yourself with the schemes of Yi Dun,<sup>12</sup> and so it is only logical that you bring criticism upon yourself. You are chronically ill, yet claim [to have] the essence the skill of doctors like He and Qin Yueren.<sup>13</sup> You frequently flee, but claim to understand the calculations of Sun and Wu Qi.<sup>14</sup> Those people who don't believe you do so because of lack of efficacy [for yourself]. (Chen 2001, 221–22; Ware 1966, 110–11)

In this remarkable passage, the skepticism of the interlocutor emphasizes observable evidence as criteria for determining the success or failure of Ge Hong's practice. The interlocutor invokes these empirical standards to cast doubt on Ge Hong's authenticity in two ways. First, as a practitioner, Ge Hong may be observed to lack any outward signs of the successful practice of the arts of longevity, such as unusual hairs, markings, or advanced age. Second, as a peddler of a specific lineage of techniques, the interlocutor attacks his textual authority by questioning his empirical experience, arguing that Ge Hong has never witnessed any of the transcendent or supernatural phenomena he claims are possible. Moreover, the interlocutor couches his insistence on observable evidence in broad terms, arguing that any assertion regarding the reality of transcendence must be based on more than Ge Hong's own experience. Put simply, if transcendence is possible, then it must surely be the case that many people have either seen transcedents or witnessed adepts achieving transcendence. It is not enough that Ge Hong

asserts their existence; they must serve more than a narrative function and become realia, tangible and observable phenomena.

The interlocutor can only conclude with a series of examples meant to highlight the hypocritical nature of Ge Hong's work, which professes to offer knowledge he would appear to lack. The remainder of the passage is simply a list of historical figures meant to highlight his deficiencies, contrasting wealth, health, and tactical knowledge with poverty, illness, and cowardice in order to level charges of ignorance, hypocrisy, and self-deception against Ge Hong's literary persona. Here, the interlocutor's voice refers to the literary tropes of Ge Hong's authorial self-presentation, found both in his authorial postface and throughout the rest of the *Master Embracing Simplicity*, which is largely crafted using the themes of poverty, illness, and physical weakness. Ge Hong frequently employs such tropes to explain his inability to achieve transcendence:

But I suffer from poverty and lack of resources, and have encountered considerable misfortune, so that I have nothing to rely on in unceasing turmoil, while the lanes of travel have been cut, and the ingredients for medicines are unobtainable, so that I unexpectedly cannot manufacture elixirs. Now when I tell people that I know how to make gold and silver but I personally remain cold and hungry, how do I differ from the person who cannot walk but sells medicine for lameness? It is impossible to get people to believe you (Chen 2001, 631; Ware 1966, 262)!

Several recent studies have argued that the poverty and isolation Ge Hong alludes to in his writing is largely a literary trope, and few critical scholars take seriously the notion that Ge Hong lived his life in a state of poverty so extreme that he "remained cold and hungry" (Sailey, 1978, 279; Wells 2001, 64–65). As we have seen, it is quite possible that at the time he wrote the *Master Embracing Simplicity*, Ge Hong had already received the tutelage of at least one wealthy enthusiast of transcendence and longevity practices, his father-in-law, Bao Jing, and even inherited from him alchemical texts and techniques (Wells 2009, 76). With wealthy connections and a record of military service for which he would be rewarded various positions by the prime minister, Wang Dao (Wells 2009, 78–79), the notion that only poverty and a lack of connections stood between Ge Hong and success is more than a little dubious.

On a rhetorical level, the fictitious interlocutor's assertion that Ge Hong lacks outward "signs" of success recalls Ge Hong's doubts about the many

imposters and hucksters used in the *Master Embracing Simplicity* as cautionary tales for future adepts. The case of Li Guan is particularly instructive. Nothing is known of Li Guan outside of Ge Hong's account, which begins with speculation that he probably came from western China and appeared knowledgeable in certain healing arts. Mistaken for Li A, a mystical figure from the mid-third century with powers of prognostication who "never ate normal foods," Li Guan attracted a large following and with it a large ego. Li Guan dispensed medicine and instructed his followers in esoteric methods of swallowing breaths and other longevity exercises, but Ge Hong judges his techniques to be shallow at best. But what affirms Ge Hong's judgment was Li Guan's advanced age and emaciated state, which made him "no different from ordinary men" (Chen 2001, 358; Ware 1966, 159). Eventually, Li Guan died of plague, and Ge Hong writes in "The Meaning of the Way" (*Dao yi*), "[Li] Guan grew old and so became old: as the years passed, Li Guan aged, and when it came time to die, he died. From this he did not attain the Way; it became evident for all to know. How can there be any doubt?" (Chen 2001, 359; Ware 1966, 160). Most troubling of all to Ge Hong is that Li Guan's pupils keep his tradition alive and his teachings "fill the land south of the Yangzi" (Chen 2001, 359; Ware 1966, 160).

Li Guan is but one example illustrating the ways in which adepts employed visual signs as proof of their authenticity to lay people and to each other, what he calls "authenticating somatic features" (Campany 2009, 148). Thus Ge Hong criticizes Li Guan for laying claim to achievements that are not his and argues that the proof of his charade is inscribed on his very person. I would go further to argue that not only does Ge Hong essentially commit the same offense, but he also demonstrates an acute self-awareness of his peculiar and awkward situation. This is not to suggest that Ge Hong is necessarily being consciously deceptive; after all, the most convincing story is often the one we tell ourselves. However, we may argue that in terms of the rubric of proof espoused within the text, there exists no tangible difference between Ge Hong and Li Guan. Both claim to follow traditions, possess esoteric knowledge, bear none of the expected signs of success, and ultimately died.

Ge Hong brings a practitioner's perspective to the debate about transcendence, but it is a perspective informed by an awareness of these discontinuities between the discourse of longevity techniques, his self-presentation within the text, and his lived experience. In other words, Ge Hong not only addresses the issue of empirical doubt as did Wang Chong and Xi Kang, but also addresses how such doubt creates problems

for his own self-presentation. In empirical terms, there is no substantive difference between Ge Hong and the “false” practitioners he decries. By his own explicit criteria—that seeing is believing—he has no more way to demonstrate the truth of his own tradition or prove its authenticity than do Gu Qiang or Li Guan. Indeed, Ge Hong cannot prove or substantiate any success in terms of achieving transcendence or longevity; to do so would be to identify with the fraud perpetrated by the charlatans he decries. His only rhetorical recourse is to admit his own failings, which he does by using the doubts of the interlocutor to call attention to them. By engaging the discourse of doubt, Ge Hong is also able to explicitly articulate his “web of interlocution,” allowing him to locate his authorial persona within the discursive space of longevity and draw distinctions between his own work, skeptics, charlatans, and even the ideal of transcendence (Parker, 2007, 16; Taylor 1989, 36). Interlocution and skepticism play a central role in creating his literary persona by providing him with an audience both for whom and in contrast to he may refine the ideology of his act of self-creation (Nehamas 1985, 186).

Ge Hong’s accomplishment thus went well beyond writing a philosophical and religious text to create a memorable and enduring literary persona, the Master Embracing Simplicity. In this act of self-creation, Ge Hong not only attempted to cast himself as a sage for his era, but like autobiographers of every literary tradition, he also recast his identity to fashion a public, literary persona and developed an enduring, historical figure (Wright 2006, 83). The Master Embracing Simplicity draws on a distinguished lineage of teachers and texts for his knowledge, has students of his own, and has withdrawn from the world to pursue higher aims such as techniques of transcendence. The resulting image, largely unprecedented in early Chinese philosophical literature, is not ostensibly consistent with Ge Hong’s failure to become transcendent. Indeed, Paul Eakin, the distinguished scholar of autobiographical narrative, might argue that Ge Hong has violated a key tenet of self-representation, as the conflict between his lived experiences and self-narrative creates a discontinuity so great that the author himself cannot ignore it. Moreover, as Eakin makes clear, the danger in such instances is to both the verisimilitude of the narrative and the credibility of the author himself. A poor performance of the self not only results in rejection by one’s audience but also constitutes a substantial challenge to one’s identity (Eakin 2008, 35). Indeed, had Ge Hong claimed the success of Gu Qiang or Li Guan, his public persona would no doubt have suffered a similar collapse. Such fraud would have relegated him to the company of

the charlatans and hucksters he despised; only the skeptical turn of his rhetorical interlocutor rescues his authorial persona and literary authenticity from the ignominy of success.

### CONCLUSION

When the twin issues of empirical proof and authenticity move to the foreground, a clear tension arises between the narrative forms used to describe adepts and the lived experience of practitioners. We may ask whether the doubt expressed by the interlocutor represents any kind of coherent counterdiscourse to the belief in transcendence, and perhaps it did. Early in his first chapter of the *Inner Chapters*, “On Transcendence,” Ge Hong’s relates to us a portion of Cao Zhi’s (192–232) treatise, “Discussion of the Resolution of Doubts” (Shi yi lun) in which he describes how Cao Zhi’s doubts about transcendence were dissolved by his witness to miraculous events (Chen 2001, 39; Ware 1966, 40). But we can also see that skepticism and doubt were native to the discourse of the adepts and constituted the charges of malpractice they leveled at one another. The doubt in Ge Hong’s account, confronted at times through the rhetorical device of the interlocutor, demonstrates that Ge Hong was aware of the apparent contradictions between his self-construction and his lived experience. The stakes are high, for Ge Hong claims to have many key advantages over his competition, which makes his failure to attain transcendence all the more dramatic and difficult to explain. Moreover, as we have observed, Ge Hong’s road to longevity and transcendence is based on study and knowledge rather than on divine revelation or fate. How, then, does he explain his lack of success, and what is the utility of calling attention to his failure?

We might answer this question by observing a few essential points. First, Ge Hong’s defense against doubt needed only to be adequate enough to achieve specific rhetorical goals. As we have seen, doubt and skepticism in early China were relative terms. Like Wang Chong, who doubted that dragons flew but believed they swam, the lay population and educated people lived in a world that admitted the regularity of supernormal phenomena. I reject the idea that we can discern within such doubt and skepticism a tradition that rejects religion per se in early China. Ge Hong probably did not confront a dogmatic atheism or agnosticism that typifies popular modern conceptions of skepticism and doubt; the question was simply whose version of a supernormal event or phenomenon to believe.

In sociological terms, it may be that the explanation for failure needed only to be plausible enough to serve the purpose of promoting Ge Hong’s

career by preserving the integrity of his literary persona and thereby salvaging the utility of the text as a pedagogical tool for others in their own practice. In this regard, the doubts expressed within the text need only serve as a foil to transcend the narrative inconsistency of Ge Hong's account so as to explain why he had failed to achieve success with his own esoteric methods while preserving the authority of the text and tradition. It is possible that around the time he wrote the *Master Embracing Simplicity*, Ge Hong was engaged in the study of esoteric techniques with his father-in-law, Bao Jing, governor of Nanhai, and a scholarly reputation combined with honorable military service would provide a strong basis for an official career. I am not necessarily suggesting that Ge Hong did not believe what he claimed (although the idea raises some interesting possibilities) and cynically put forth so monumental a labor merely for political gain, but we cannot ignore the role his outspoken promotion of longevity and transcendence played in a social-political environment in which a powerful minister such as Wang Dao was well known for his interest in the subject. Thus it is important to remind ourselves that a text intended for many potential audiences may have served different yet complementary agendas for the author.

The position of Ge Hong as a figure within a religious tradition, and his stated intention to provide pedagogical tools for future seekers of transcendence, begs the question of whether the interlocutor's doubts might serve any formal religious function within the text. Certainly the more substantive challenges posed by the interlocutor allow Ge Hong to refine the views of his literary persona as an adherent to a specific tradition of practice, not as a logician who attempts a rational explanation of empirically observable phenomena (Tang 1991, 193). From this point of view Ge Hong's interlocutor may not represent a true skeptical position inasmuch as the author employs skeptical methodology to establish the limits of reason and experience and thus guide the reader toward other positive ways of knowing or reaching truths (Cheng 1977, 139). That is, even if the doubts expressed by Ge Hong's fictional interlocutor represent contemporary arguments against extreme longevity and transcendence, Ge Hong may have used them for creative purposes such as acknowledging human finitude or stimulating the reader to move beyond dead dogmas based upon a critical assessment of transcendence (Baird 1980, 173–75). In this way, doubt may serve an important function for the faithful and does not represent a real dichotomy of views; for it is precisely because we find the arguments against it to be so logical that they are useful

in religious terms, as they require the reader to “make an uncertain judgment and then act courageously” in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary (Baird 1980, 178). Because Ge Hong strongly advocates for a mechanistic view of the process of achieving transcendence, we rarely encounter this kind of “leap of faith” within the text, though at one point in the chapter “Countering Objections” he does suggest the possibility by stating that there are some issues that cannot be resolved by evidence and fine arguments (Chen 2001, 282; Ware 1966, 134). The doubts expressed by the interlocutor in the text may thus demonstrate the centrality of faith in Ge Hong’s rather mechanistic methods of achieving transcendence.

Ge Hong’s use of the same rhetoric of skepticism in his attacks on contemporary charlatans and his calls for similar standards of empirical evidence for their claims suggests that the interlocutor’s challenge to his textual authority served more than a religious function internal to text and tradition. Ge Hong wielded these withering attacks on the truth claims of others with dramatic rhetorical effect. Moreover, the interlocutor’s challenge to the authenticity of Ge Hong’s self-presentation belies the importance of his authorial persona to the body of knowledge he presents in the text. Because Ge Hong as the Master Embracing Simplicity makes a unique claim to the efficacy of his tradition, challenges to the truth claims of the persona threaten to undermine the entire work. Ironically, Ge Hong finds success in failure. By turning this skepticism from the claims of his competitors to the authenticity of his own experience, Ge Hong salvages his self-presentation by crafting a complex, nuanced persona distinguishable from his ideological opponents; he is neither a doubter who insists purely upon the certainty of empirical observation, nor is he a dupe who accepts the fame and reputation of a practitioner as proof of their authenticity. He is instead a philosopher of discernment and discrimination who, faced with long odds, has simply failed to achieve his goal but has not lost faith in its attainability. In this regard, his persona embodies the vision of the search for transcendence that he espouses. Failure and doubt provide an opportunity for Ge Hong to carve out a unique space in the discourse of transcendence in his era, crafting a unique literary persona as a kind of “extended self” through time. The text replaces the teacher for future adepts, creates a lasting work of philosophical literature, and finally fashions an altogether remarkable self-narrative that challenges the paradigm of autobiographical prose in his era. The doubts of the interlocutor lay bare Ge Hong’s inability to achieve physical transcendence but cast the *Master Embracing Simplicity* as a text intended for literary immortality.

## NOTES

1. Attempts to discover agnosticism and atheism within certain early textual traditions—namely, those associated with the *Ru*—began with Western religious missions but reached their maturity in the work of Feng Yu-lan (1895–1990), who counterpoised what he termed “Rationalism” with religion while dismissing later works of the Daoist canon (Clark 2000, 37–40; Feng 1952, 33–42). Feng Yu-Lan’s writing had a clear impact on nonspecialists such as James Throver’s (1980) *The Alternative Tradition: Religion and the Rejection of Religion in the Ancient World*.

2. Ge Hong’s argument in this instance bears a strong resemblance to the skeptical arguments of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French intellectuals who employed skepticism to defend the Catholic faith. By arguing that the senses, and thus our judgments, could not be trusted, they implied that logic, philosophy, and empirical observation could not be routes to certain knowledge; only divine revelation could provide the basis for faith (Popkin 2003, 83).

3. While it is possible in such instances that Ge Hong is portraying the interlocutor as testing the consistency of his arguments (to believe X is surely to admit Y), there is little to suggest that Ge Hong portrays his interlocutor as a latter-day Wang Chong, who adopted the positions of his opponents when convenient (Nylan 1997, 146).

4. There is no consensus on the meaning and importance of Wang Chong’s project, which has not garnered the scholarly attention it deserves. For an alternative view of Wang Chong’s work, see Micheal Puett, “Listening to Sages” (*Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005–06): 273–81).

5. In recounting and elaborating upon the tale of Lu Ao found in the *Huainanzi* chapter, “Complying with the Way,” wings become an important sticking point. According to Wang, Lu Ao claimed that only dragons flew without wings. However, because Lu Ao once witnessed a miraculous stranger flying during his travels but did not mention the stranger had wings, Lu’s story lacked consistency and therefore credibility.

6. On this point Xi Kang differs from Ge Hong, who believed immortality could be achieved through study.

7. Although the pursuit of longevity and transcendence practices is often understood to involve the adept’s renunciation of society and worldly pursuits, for which we find evidence for in the writing of Xi Kang, recent studies of Chinese and non-Chinese religious traditions challenge the conventional view of eremitism as utter social isolation, even for the purpose of religious practice. An example in the Chinese tradition is Robert Campany’s latest volume, which describes the necessary social dimensions of the adept and challenges the idea that practitioners pursued isolation (Campany 2009, 151–52). Other studies of Ge Hong’s notion of eremitism analyze its ostensible social isolation as a public performance that ironically reinforces the renunciate’s ties to social and political life (Wells 2009, 69).

8. Ge Hong’s account of Li Gen in the *Master Embracing Simplicity* differs

from his account of Li Gen in *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* fascicle 10 (Campany 2002, 218–20). The two texts differ over whether Wu ever completed the process, with the *Traditions* claiming Wu succeeded in manufacturing elixirs.

9. Literally “Yellow and White” may be here understood as gold and silver. Techniques of aurifaction (making gold from base metals) and manufacturing silver were important to impoverished adepts who may have had little access to supplies of precious metals (Chen 2001, 618–19).

10. An Qisheng (Sima 1999, 1385).

11. Tao Zhu Gong was an enormously wealthy minister of the fifth century (Sima 1999, 3256–57).

12. Yi Dun was a salt merchant of the Warring States period who became incredibly wealthy.

13. Qin Yueren (Sima 1999, 2786).

14. Sun Wu author of the *Sunzi bingfa* (The Art of War). Wu Qi was another famous strategist from the state of Wei during the Warring States era (Sima 1999, 2161).

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