

Early Chinese Religion

Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)

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THE SUBJECT AND THE SOVEREIGN: EXPLORING THE SELF
IN EARLY CHINESE SELF-CULTIVATION

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Introduction

One of the broadly shared assumptions of Western philosophy is that the dominant function in human beings is thinking and knowing. It deals with self-conscious subjects as the sole cause of their actions, transparent to—and sovereign over—themselves. Philosophers find, in the thoughts they entertain about their own thoughts, the very substance of their beings. They focus their sight and attention on thought as if it were the summit of their activity. They deliberately forget everything that is prior to thought, prior to language, prior to clear and distinct ideas, namely their inner dispositions, moods, frames of mind, mental impulse or life force. The essence of classical metaphysics revolves around the question: how is true knowledge possible? Plato's concept of *psyche*, Aristotle's *noos*, Descartes' *res cogitans*, or Kant's transcendental subject were all posited in order to answer this fundamental question of true knowledge.

From this very general perspective we can discern a duality that runs from ancient Greece through the Hellenic world down to Christianized Europe—a duality first outlined by Pierre Hadot and then by Michel Foucault—between a theoretical subject primarily conceived as a thinking being aspiring to authentic knowledge, and an ethical subject engaged in the process of transforming himself through various practices. The latter tendency seems to prevail in early China and constitutes one of its most salient orientations. These practices transform the self conceived as an *ethos*, defined by one's character, inner dispositions and behavior. Contrasting with the theoretical question of knowledge, the way of ethics explores the construction—but, as we will see below, also the dissolution—of the self. The subject or the self is conceived as the totality of its concrete aspects, not as an immortal ontological reality distinct from the body. How were these practices of the self envisioned and debated in their formative period? To what extent did they contribute to the development of a religious sensibility? What kind of body is shaped in

self-cultivation? Is there a compatibility between individual practices and social norms? How did the exploration of the self affect, and how was it in turn affected by, the conception of political authority? What is the role played by texts in the self-formation process?

The history of self-cultivation for the period of the Warring States can only be retraced through very incomplete records that offer a fragmentary portrait of the beliefs, discourses and practices developed at the time. The dating and authorship of the relevant writings is a matter of conjecture and frequently revised working hypotheses. Many texts pertaining to the so-called philosophical traditions have been read over the course of the past decades in the light of new material discovered in tombs. These materials confirm and strengthen the ties between philosophical speculation and concrete practices. It should be noted that in many cases manuscripts found in tombs have a higher degree of technicality than the transmitted texts from the same period. Such are the legal and administrative documents unearthed at Shuihudi 睡虎地, Zhangjiashan 張家山 and Juyan 居延. The tombs unearthed at Baoshan 抱山, Wangjiatai 王家台 and Yinwan 尹灣 contain divinatory speculations intertwined with administrative concerns, while political and cosmological insights define the overall hybrid inspiration of the scrolls and slips found at Guodian 郭店 and Yinqueshan 銀雀山. The site of Mawangdui, where one version of the *Wuxing pian* 五行篇 (*Five kinds of action*) was discovered in 1973, also harbored a wide array of technical texts, even if some of them do have a philosophical inspiration or offer a variant of transmitted texts such as the *Daode jing*. Among others, Mark Csikszentmihályi reminds us that our textual record has not only been augmented, but now enjoys an unprecedented variety of genres which dangerously shakes the frail edifice of received notions of schools and textual genres.¹ We must now take stock of this variety and variability of texts and patiently rewrite the intellectual history of pre-imperial China.

Historians also keep reminding us that an absolute beginning is never to be found anywhere. There is certainly a prehistory of self-cultivation practices in archaic China, or during the Spring and Autumn period. Unfortunately, what we know about it is most incomplete. The written records are often from a later time, and the earliest extant texts that

¹ Mark Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue. Ethics and the body in early China* (Leiden and Boston, 2004), p. 1.

provide full-fledged description of self-cultivation practices mostly date from the Han. Furthermore, the meaning of many key terms is often hard to interpret and remains subject to conflicting interpretations by modern scholars.

As a phase subsequent to philological and text-critical discussion, the systematic analysis of the literary and rhetorical structures of self-cultivation texts, their characteristic stock of expressions, their influence on and relationship to texts labeled as “philosophical,” and the history of their interaction with society are all topics that await exploration. The thorough study of all these contextual features is a Herculean undertaking which would require far more than a single monograph. But we must admit at the outset that far too little is known about the uses of these texts or the extent of their influence on society.

We have already noted that self-cultivation does not fit neatly into the traditional doxography of competing schools of “philosophy,” as it concerns instructions for meditation as much as therapeutic principles, metaphysical speculations, gymnastic exercises and postures, culinary recipes, and cosmological considerations. While this disparate group of texts, brought together under the rubric “self-cultivation,” constitutes a source of primary importance for understanding Chinese thought and the development of the Daoist religion, there is a marked difference between the long-lasting influence which these texts had on early Chinese thinkers (Xun Kuang 荀况 first of all, but also the anonymous writers of the Daoist-oriented encyclopedias, the *Annals of Sire Lü*, and the *Huainanzi*) and the striking absence of an exegetical tradition for foundational² texts such as the chapters of the “Art of the mind” in the *Guanzi*.³

Self-cultivation is furthermore an expression that may appear vague and too broad. Linguistically, it has, however, precise counterparts in primary sources, with a set of equivalent expressions using the term *xiu* 修 (to care for, to work on, to cultivate) and/or *yang* 養 (to nourish,

² By “foundational,” we mean that the technical terminology forged in these texts and their basic tenets exerted a long-lasting and pervasive influence on major Warring States and Han texts later viewed as Daoist or Legalist, but also on authors claiming they belonged to the Ru tradition.

³ For a general overview, accessible to non-specialists, of the reasons for this disregard and the importance of archeological discoveries in recent decades as well as questions pertaining to labeling philosophical schools, see the work of Harold Roth, *Original Tao: “Inward training” (Nei-yeh) and the foundations of Taoist mysticism* (New York, 1999); see in particular the introduction and chap. 5.

to nurture), in combination with *shen* 身 (the self, or the body), *xin* 心 (the heart/mind) or *xing* 形 (the physical “form” or appearance). In its more general aspect, or if we try to take stock of its variable forms, self-cultivation consists of voluntary, personal, self-initiated practices that aim at moral achievement, cognitive enlightenment, vital flourishing, long life or immortality but also, and not infrequently, undisputed political domination. From a more negative standpoint, we can view the development of these practices in the context of kingdoms plagued by wars and daily violence, in an atmosphere of threats and dangers where the need to preserve oneself from natural catastrophes and political violence became a prominent concern. Self-cultivation is not so much focused on a theoretical doctrine as on the realization of a certain way of life and takes into account components of human experience of universal significance: hunger, disease, desire, death, the need for physical security and peace of mind, or the grounds for virtuous action. Some, like the various authors of the *Zhuangzi*, conceived ways not to fear death, disease or physical accidents; others sought ways to avoid death by a process of transformation leading to the production of a body impervious to decay and extinction.⁴ Such attitudes, partly derived from ancient religious behavior, significantly patterned the development of Daoism during the Han dynasty.⁵

Self-cultivation comprises exercises and practices that concern the health of the body, the honing of sensory perception (chiefly seeing and hearing), the mastery of mental workings (feeling, thinking, speaking), and the efficacy of action. These exercises often take the form of a discipline of emotions, passions, and desires, ethical attention to one’s words and deeds, and meditation leading to a cosmic conscience enabling one to shed individual biases, petty worries and attachment to the ego. They imply a constant effort of the will until natural spontaneity takes over partial ways of responding and acting. Self-cultivation thus presupposes without explicitly stating it a deep faith in human moral liberty and in the possibility of perfecting oneself. It is also conditioned by the deep awareness that human beings are the only creatures that deviate from

⁴ A practice later called *shijie* 尸解 “liberation from the dead body,” documented among others in the *Biographies of arrayed immortals* (*Liexian zhuan*), it is also called *qing shen* 輕身 “lightening the body.”

⁵ For instance, ethical attention to oneself and to the internal workings of the heart/mind is referred to by *jing* 精, which designates purity and deference in a sacrificial context. Many religious and ritual terms are “recycled” to name dispositions and frames of mind explored in self-cultivation.

their *xing* 性, their “inborn nature.”⁶ Many of these texts are, above all, concerned with a form of asceticism which bears a certain similarity to Stoicism,⁷ though it must be noted that beyond this distant similarity, the Greek and Chinese approaches remain fundamentally distinct and rely on diverging assumptions.

Early self-cultivation texts evoke a state of ultimate perfection and portray the figure of the sage accordingly. This almost transcendent norm serves to express the possibility in everyone to gain an enlightened or ecstatic apprehension of the world, in a way that has often been seen by modern scholars as a religious or mystical experience. One of our working hypotheses, which finds its more manifest confirmation in Han Feizi’s Daoist-rooted doctrine, is that each consistent conception of the sage elaborated in a given society develops in direct interaction with a certain view of rulership, and that the manner in which the full grasp of one’s inner self is described displays similar features to the optimal efficiency of political power. In other words, the way a man is supposed to experience full possession of his inner reality and to fully develop his nature offers a paradigm which influences and is in turn influenced by the shaping of the political landscape and the nature of kingship. This is obviously the case in early China, and we shall first focus on the way the inner self was discovered, described and debated by early literati. We will explore the psycho-physiological discourses at the heart of the representations of human life in order to understand the development of a theory of sovereignty that played a pivotal role in the ideological creation of imperial China during the Warring States.

If meditative practice stands at the core of the most interesting early sources of self-cultivation, we should note that meditation can take many forms according to the various textual traditions. Some resemble Hellenistic and Roman practices such as, in the Confucian tradition, the habit of a daily recounting of one’s behavior to others. It can imply the daily remembrance of one’s deeds and words and the deliberation

⁶ Shen Dao 慎到 (ca. 360–ca. 285 BC), a leading Daoist-oriented figure in the Jixia academy discussed below, is credited with a felicitous formula recorded in the last chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: “A simple clod of earth never loses the Way” 夫塊不失道 (*Zhuangzi jishi* [hereafter ZZJS], Beijing, 1961, repr. 1997), “Tian xia,” 33.1088.

⁷ Both aspire to a spiritual sovereignty freed from individuality, identify the principle of the genesis of all things with a material element, the original cosmic breath, in the perspective of a dynamic conception of nature, and locate the organ of thought in the breast.

of an inner judge on their moral value, as in the *Analects*, where Master Zeng confesses:

Every day I examine myself on these three points: in acting on behalf of others, have I always been loyal to their interests? In intercourse with my friends, have I always been true to my word? Have I failed to repeat the precepts that have been handed down to me?⁸

This is one of the rare examples of moral and psychological introspection, which is in distinct contrast with the “Art of the mind,” turned toward internal physiological processes rather than thoughts recollected in one’s own sphere of intimacy.

Other forms of meditation involve more actively the resources of imagination as in the school of Zhuangzi or other Daoist milieus.⁹ In the *Zhuangzi*, meditation on several key images—concerning the formation and dissolution of things, the alternation of life and death, the underlying unity of all beings, the cosmic contemplation of the vastness surrounding us—triggers the powers of imagination and highlights the insignificance of human existence in the immensity of space and time. Such principles must always be at hand so that they can serve in every circumstance of human life, as exemplified by the facetious character Master Si 子祀 in chapter six “Dazong shi” 大宗師, who restates them in an extravagant but serene manner on his deathbed.

As an incipient phase in meditation exercises, beginners were given a few formulae summarizing the defining orientations of the circle they joined: “The Great One generates water”; “human nature comes from

⁸ *Lunyu* 1.4 (*Lunyu yizhu*, ed. Yang Bojun, Beijing 1980, repr. 1998), p. 3; trans. A. Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 1938, London, repr. 2000).

⁹ I continue to use the term “Daoism,” as a pragmatic *a posteriori* but historically-rooted category, to refer not to an organized school of thought but to authors, texts, milieus and tendencies of the 4th and 3rd centuries BC that all have an *air de famille*. All consider the Way as a foundational ontological category, as the source of ultimate enlightenment, in opposition to a form of knowledge defined by learning and study, which accepts the paramount value of speech. Daoist discourse is furthermore associated with practices of the self aspiring to vitality, longevity and meditative trance, often discussed in terms of *qi* 氣, *jing* 精 and *shen* 神, leaving out of primary consideration the patterns of behavior dictated by the sages of the past. No strict borders separate these masters, disciples and textual lineages from the entourage of other circles such as doctors, diviners and magicians. The category “Huang-Lao,” the famous “philosophical football” as Mark E. Lewis astutely puts it in *Writing and authority in early China* (Albany, 1997), denotes in this chapter texts and authors assuming most of these patterns, but with a strong emphasis on political and administrative concerns rooted in Daoist cosmology.

Heaven's decree"; "the quintessence of all living things, when arising, produces the array of stars." To endow these formulae with the greatest spiritual efficacy, they had to be brief and striking, enabling the disciple rapidly, in a single intuition, to grasp the essentials of the doctrine so as to have them with him at all times. The reading of texts, such as the *Laozi* or the "Art of the mind" of the *Guanzi*, could also be conceived of as a spiritual exercise, insofar as the words of the master were aimed at the inner modification of the listeners or the addressees.

Self-cultivation can thus refer to an immense domain, embracing daily instructions on eating, sleeping, breathing, or having sex, gymnastic¹⁰ and hygienic exercises (such as *daoyin* 導引 "stretching and coiling"), meditative practices, cosmological discourse and moral self-inspection. Some texts emphasize the sole care of the body, others focus on moral personality, and yet others bring the mind to bear upon the principle of spontaneous agency inside the self. Each of these orientations represents a more or less distinct way of life determined by an ideal of well-being and wisdom. These practices are sometimes accompanied by an effort to explain the natural processes and the formation of things, but all pursue the goal of producing a deep transformation in the person who adopts them through the preservation and refinement of inner potency. Most masters from the Warring States deal with self-cultivation to some extent, for their "philosophy" cannot be conceived apart from a concrete way of life, be it socially involved in or utterly disengaged from the world of men.

¹⁰ Evidence for gymnastic practices in the Warring States is rather scarce, but we have more records for the Qin and Han thanks to recent archeological finds, first in Mawangdui, with the text on bamboo slips "Ten questions" (*Shiwen* 十問) and a silk manuscript with 44 illustrations of gymnastic movements performed by all kinds of male and female persons of different age, social status and attire, some subtitled with the therapeutical indication associated with the movement performed. In Zhangjiashan (northern Chu), an excavated tomb revealed a "Document of gymnastics" (*Yinshu* 引書) that comments on gymnastic movements and which we can reasonably date to the beginning of the 2nd century BC. On the tomb site of Fuyang 阜陽 in modern Anhui, dated 165 BC, bamboo slips were found that mention gymnastic practices dealing with the circulation of vital breath. The archeological site of Shuihudi 睡虎地 at Yunmeng 雲夢 in modern Hubei also revealed a manuscript in the same vein. While we shall not comment on such practices attested for the Han period, I have little doubt that they already existed in the Warring States. For a detailed analysis and references, see Catherine Despeux, "La gymnastique *dao yin* 導引 dans la Chine ancienne," *Etudes chinoises* 23 (2004), 45–81, and Livia Kohn, "Yoga and Daoyin," in L. Kohn ed., *Daoist body cultivation. Traditional models and contemporary practices* (Magdalena, NM, 2006).

This would be the occasion to delve into the multifarious works, texts and discourses elaborated over the course of one of the most intellectually creative periods of Chinese history. Within the frame of this chapter, I will not be able to deal with all the relevant material, increasingly abundant and heterogeneous; nor shall I attempt to provide a complete overview of self-cultivation in Warring States China with its continuation in the Han, or a condensed and systematic outline, or the complete coverage of a single text or a single school. Instead, I will examine the distinctive features of self-cultivation practices and isolate patterns commonly found over the course of the pre-imperial period, and finally attempt a critical analysis of these recurring themes: the ties between self-cultivation and political authority, the religious nature of meditation, conflicting conceptions of the self, the status of language and the function of texts in practices of the self. Where my analysis has gaps I hope at least to make them clearly visible so they may soon be bridged by others. Daoist-oriented texts prevail in this study, chiefly the chapters of the “Art of the mind,” for their focus on the biological foundations of ethical behavior marks a distinct rupture with a traditional education centered on the edifying behavior of the wise kings of yore or the prescriptions for codifying social relationships. These self-cultivation texts focus on the powers of the human mind (*xin* 心), and on capacities for acting upon oneself and achieving a radical process of transformation. They attempt to organize man’s capacity for spiritual life in resonance with its cosmological aspects. Such themes gave birth to a wealth of expressions and patterns which would play an essential role in the later development of Daoism and therapeutic practices in general (traditional medicine and longevity techniques) as well as in the political imagination of the foundations of power, wisdom and sovereignty.

The other main sources I mobilize here fall into two categories: 1) those which in the wake of this original Daoist program defined among other features by personal meditation and the rejection of outer learning in the process of self-formation, offer a full-fledged expression of what was only implied in these earlier texts; 2) those which express meaningful nuances or marked divergence with the functional aspects of self-cultivation originally defined in the chapters of the “Art of the mind,” thereby enabling the reader to discern ongoing debates in the early period about the nature of the self and its final destination. The often irreconcilable views held in these works are examined in association with their strong stylistic differences.

Self-cultivation and the Art of the mind

The four chapters (*pian* 篇) customarily gathered under the heading “Art of the mind” (*Xinshu* 心術)¹¹ and collected in the *Guanzi* together with many Legalist chapters and syncretic Huang-Lao texts are the among the earliest documents on self-cultivation which have survived to the present. They share many, primarily quietist themes with the book attributed to Laozi, the *Classic of the Way and its power* (*Daode jing*).¹²

These chapters were in all likelihood composed between the 4th and the 2nd century BC by literati from the Jixia 稷下 academy in the state of Qi 齊 located in the central and northern part of modern Shandong and the southern part of modern Hebei.¹³ The powerful state of Qi was the demographic and economic center of Warring States China, and its capital, Linzi 臨淄 one of the largest and richest cities of the time. King Wei 威 of Qi decided in the second half of the 4th century to grant titles and stipends to scholars who would assemble to discuss and compose essays or participate in court debates.¹⁴ In the service of the Tian 田 rulers competing for kingship, these scholars produced recipes, devices and stratagems, and could act as consultants. They enjoyed ample pay without actively holding an administrative charge. Scholars gathered from all around to discuss and study, write and train disciples, and Jixia

¹¹ These four chapters bear the following titles: “Inward training” (Neiye 內業, *Guanzi* 16.49); “Art of the mind 1” (*Xinshu shang* 心術上, *Guanzi* 13.36); “Art of the mind 2” (*Xinshu xia* 心術下, *Guanzi*, 13.37); “Purifying the mind” (Baixin 白心, *Guanzi* 13.38).

¹² From the *Laozi* is drawn the conception of the Way and various cosmological insights, as well as the idea of emptying oneself of desires and thoughts (*Daode jing* 60) and making oneself a sanctuary of calm for the mystical apprehension of the Way. While the “*Xinshu*” chapters assume and develop the conception of the Way expressed in the *Laozi*, achieving its naturalization and giving a more systematic turn to the theory of vital breath and quintessence (*jingqi* 精氣), they also promote a cultivation of the heart/mind (*xin* 心) viewed as the commanding center of the body and a possible abode for the Way or the spirit (*shen* 神). The conception of the *xin* as holding a sovereign position in the body, as the organ of thought ruling other organs, the orifices, senses and limbs, may well be the major innovation of the Jixia school. These points are discussed in detail below.

¹³ On the State of Qi, see Mark E. Lewis, “Warring States political history,” in *The Cambridge history of ancient China: from the origins of civilization to 221 B.C.*, eds Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), pp. 587–650, particularly pp. 595, 599 and 643.

¹⁴ Hu Jiacong, *Guanzi xintan* (Beijing, 2003), pp. 20–27. Cf. Mark E. Lewis, *Writing and authority*, p. 77.

thus became the center of major trends of thought over 150 years, from 374 down to 221 BC.

As the most renowned academic center of its time, Jixia was involved at many levels in the composition of texts such as the *Guanzi* or the *Xunzi*, but also of the now either lost or unclearly identified works of Song Jian 宋鉞, Shen Dao 慎到, Yin Wen 尹文 or Tian Pian 田駢.¹⁵ The *Guanzi* is not the work of a single author, but of many anonymous brushes¹⁶ composing over several generations, from the 4th century BC down to the beginning of the Han. The fact that Jixia developed along with the political reforms of the Tian clan and that its textual production saw the light in the contentious atmosphere of the Hundred Schools is of primary importance to understanding the tone and terms of the “Art of the mind.”

Regarding its concrete philosophical significance, the “Art of the mind” defines its aim as the deliverance of man from the distracted and upset unfolding of his life in order to prepare him for a superior form of existence. It offers a set of procedures for intervening in human life by proposing an end beyond its ordinary goals and pursuing one’s healing while defining a meditative experience in cosmic terms. Self-cultivation leads to the interiorization of social and ritual values by reuniting the mind (*xin*) and the spirit (*shen* 神). It consists in an ever-ascending path wherein one’s basic vital energy (*qi* 氣) is transformed into quintessential energy, or vital essence (*jing* 精), which is itself, in turn, converted into spiritual energy, or spirit (*shen*). The association of these three notions borrowed from hitherto distinct spheres of experience, is initially conditioned by the pacification of the royal organ, the mind, which is progressively purged from what hinders communication with the spirit. All the while, the bodily form and its constituent parts accompany this process of internal transformation. In this sense, there is no distinction between knowing and acting upon life in self-cultivation. The four brief treatises of the “Art of the mind” describe how the human being may perfect himself through the controlled development and spontaneous transformation of his vital forces.

¹⁵ Cf. Hu Jiacong, *Guanzi xintan*, passim.

¹⁶ We shall leave here out of consideration the debate on the authorship of the numerous chapters of the *Guanzi*. For a survey of this debate, see Allyn W. Rickett, *Guanzi. Political, economic, and philosophical essays from early China*, vol. 2 (Princeton, 1998), and for the “Xinshu” chapters in particular, Romain Graziani, “De la régence du monde à la souveraineté intérieure. Une étude des quatre chapitres de ‘L’art de l’esprit’ ‘du Guanzi,’” PhD dissertation (University Paris 7, 2001).

Any person who embarks on the path of self-mastery becomes a distinct field of experience. The most characteristic texts in this intellectual current, which combine meditative principles, cosmological explanations and political considerations, were in ancient China like a declaration of independence of the human mind from divinatory procedures—we will come back to this idea below—and an affirmation of personal power over one's surrounding objective conditions (be they ritualistic, educative or social). The anonymous compilers of the "Art of the mind" assert that through the sole exertion of his own forces and mental discipline, the human being can attain to the spirit without initiatory ceremonies or religious procedures. What then are the actions and, more generally, the measures by which the individual accesses his internal reality? To what images do these texts have recourse in their attempts to represent the interior world? How is the paradigmatic experience of the sage who "obtains" (*de* 得) the spirit conveyed? And what exactly is meant by the possession of the spirit?

The first text, "Inward training" (*Neiye* 內業), which may be considered a, if not *the*, foundational text of Daoist thought, begins with a discussion of vital energy (*qi*), the fundamental substance of the universe and constitutive principle of all reality. We can find in this text the principal topics of self-cultivation that will later be developed in Daoist and Confucian schools: 1) the care for one's life and body (sensory organs, hair, skin, bones and sinews); 2) the search for the optimal development of cognitive and perceptive power, where knowledge is not conceived as a positive content of concrete information about objects, but as an optimal alertness of the senses; 3) the cultivation of inner dispositions (attention, quietness, good mood) tied to the study of forms of behavior and external conduct (ritual, poetry and music as regulators of emotions such as anger, worry or excitement); 4) rules for eating and drinking that extend the ideal of the regulation of *qi* to other specialized organs in the body; 5) returning to one's inborn nature and the consequent obtainment of a good and pacified heart (*shanxin anchu* 善心安處); 6) the ability to speak and act in such a way that all things of their own accord fall into step (as in the *Analects*, we find elements of magical thought in the asserted ability of the sage to command assent and get things done by his mere charisma and virtue;¹⁷ 7) last, and most importantly, the

¹⁷ This point is also developed in the *Guanzi* chapters "Xingshi" 形勢 and "Baixin" 白心, as well as in *Laozi* 2 and 27 (see Hu Jiacong, *Guanzi xintan*, p. 111). The strong

development of an art of ruling conceived as the natural extension of self-cultivated potency over the world. This point is virtually present in the “Neiye” and in *Laozi* 8, and fully developed in the “Xinshu shang” and in the “Baixin,” as well as in the “Shuyan” 樞言.¹⁸

The ultimate aim of these teachings is the transformation of the mind (*xin*), the royal organ¹⁹ which transcends the restricted role allotted the other organs. It is responsible for organizing the corporeal form by gathering vital energy. *Qi*, as the fundamental substance of life, is thus the point of departure for thinking about the self, as well as the genetic principle of the cosmogonic stanza that constitutes the overture of the “Neiye.” Meditation on vital energy attempts to spread an almost divine mental clairvoyance and spiritual energy (*shen*) throughout the individual and thereby generate the presence of a quasi-divine spirit within. This unfurling is experienced on the subjective level as a sort of trance. At the same time, this divine mental clairvoyance, which is the culmination of the internal breaths, is used by the ruler to reign harmoniously, through the charismatic expression of his Power, over his court and the human community at large.

Let us first reconsider the relationship between the body and the mind, in order to sketch a few fundamental elements upon which the more specialized medical or religious discourses were later elaborated. These conceptions date from the period when ideas on human physiology began to proliferate in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC. Phenomena which appear as heterogeneous—streams of thought, bodily strength, physical violence, states of mind, moods or emotions—all stem from one fundamental source, vital energy. Differentiated according to its phases

influence of the *Laozi* on the “Baixin” has been outlined by Hu Jiacong, who made comparative lists of all borrowings (ibid., p. 309).

¹⁸ Hu Jiacong, *Guanzi xintan*, p. 111.

¹⁹ In the “Art of the mind,” the *xin* 心 appears as the sovereign element in the corporeal form responsible for ordering and regulating it: “The mind finds itself within the body in the position of the ruler. The functions shared between the nine apertures are divided like the responsibilities incumbent on officials. If the mind keeps with the spontaneous course of nature, the nine orifices follow the natural principles” (*Guanzi jiaoshi* [Changsha, 1996], Yan Changyao [1868–1944], edited by Xia Jianqin [hereafter *GZJS*], 13.36.323). On the political modeling of corporeal reality, cf. the beginning of the chapter “Cherishing life” (Guisheng, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* [hereafter *LSCQ*], ed. Chen Qiyou, [Shanghai 1984], 2/2.1), where the organs (excepting the mind) are described as servants (*yi* 役) of life who cannot act on their own initiative and must be ordered by something which controls them. We find once again in this model of the human body an attempt which was very common at the end of the Warring States period, to anchor the legitimacy of the monarchical regime in the natural order.

and its forms, *qi* is at once the individual's vitality, vigor, dynamism, breath, mood and the entirety of his sensory experiences; it is also his aggressiveness as well as his inspiration, sensual desire and mental acumen. It constitutes the material components of the body through which it also circulates in different forms, with different degrees of fluidity. *Qi* is inside and outside the body, and self-cultivation practices work on the best way to regulate and harmonize the intake and outflow of this energy.

Prior to any physiological or psychological phenomena, *qi* in its cosmic dimension is the basic material which constitutes all beings, plants, animals and humans. The oldest meaning of *qi*, long before it was defined in a cosmological context as the universal fluid, either in its active (*yang*) or passive (*yin*) form, was very similar to the Greek word *pneuma* (wind, breath, air).²⁰ Already present in oracle-bone inscriptions, it seems indeed to have originally designated an external influence—air, wind—and, by later extension, the vital breath, the principle of animation, or “internal climate.” This explains why such a term is as relevant for meteorology as it is for psychology, for inner moods and for external vapors, for time and for temperament. *Qi* is indeed matter that is always in motion—a principle of motion. In petty men, the *qi* moves in a chaotic way up and down the body, for they have only deviant *qi* (*xie qi* 邪氣), while the sage, enjoying a regular *qi* (*zheng qi* 正氣) can follow a straight path.²¹ With a proper regimen, careful intake of food, sleep, moderation in desires and emotions, timely activity and

²⁰ Paul Unschuld has noted that Hippocratic medicine in the 4th century BC in Greece made reference in its inquiries into pathogenic agents in the expression *phusai ek ton perittomaston* Φύσαι εκ των περιττώματων, which describes precisely the elements which are appropriate to *qi*, more specifically the fumes which rise from food; see Paul Unschuld, *Medicine in China: a history of ideas* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 72. Such a similarity is not surprising since it is common to the myths and cosmology of many civilizations to envision the creation of living beings through some sort of primordial breath. In the Biblical tradition for example, Yahweh models man with clay and then instills the “breath of life” into his creature's nostrils; analogous myths were developed in Egypt, Sumer and Greece. In each case, the human being, formed from some material (earth, wood or bone), receives the breath of the Creator. For a detailed study of the notion of breath in European philosophical and religious traditions, see Gérard Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du pneuma, du stoïcisme à Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1945); for a medical approach to the notion of *pneuma* in the Hellenistic world, see also Armelle Debru, *Le corps respirant. La pensée physiologique chez Galien* (Leiden, New York, 1996).

²¹ *Huainan honglie jijie* (hereafter *HNZ*) edited by Liu Wendian (1893–1958), annotated by Feng Yi and Qiao Hua (Beijing, 1980, repr. 1997), 14.475.

sufficient rest, pernicious *qi* do not enter the body.²² When a sensory organ is filled with *qi*, it is sharpened and works to its full capacity, allowing for a luminous apprehension of the world. *Qi* thus accounts for the atmospheric and environmental influences at large on the body. As such, it is the most precious resource of life and at the same time the source of all pathogenic agents liable to disrupt and harm the body from the outside. It is the medium through which humans can act not only on the whole human realm, but also on animals, and even move Heaven.²³ This energy, which pertains as much to thought as to matter (it may be situated more closely to one or the other depending on its degree of refinement), is thus the very substance of our physical and mental functioning. The mind-matter coupling of the Cartesian tradition is replaced by another, more relative complementarity, which considers the breath of life as either gross or refined, rough or subtle.

If to be human is to be one form among many forms, it also means being the only form which understands itself as having the capacity to refine and transform its energies by its own initiative. Materially speaking, vital energy is drawn from food. Considerations on the mind's power and abilities are coupled with dietetic instructions which punctuate the stanzas of many self-cultivation texts and injunctions to leave one's orifices open and control one's system of exchange with the outside world. Vital energy may become essential energy (*jing* 精)—“essential” in the sense of a perfume's extracted “essence”—by elevating it to a higher phase. This essence or quintessence is capable of transforming itself, suddenly and unpredictably, into spirit (*shen* 神). While the term *shen* originally referred to the manes of the dead, heavenly ancestors, and divinities in a religious context, it gradually came to signify spiritual energy in self-cultivation texts.²⁴ As will be examined in greater detail below, the transformation of basic energy (*qi*) into spiritual energy (*shen*) is achieved by the concentration of the mind on its own activity. In its preserved or refined state, the life force animating the body

²² On the elimination of pernicious breath, see also HNZ 20. 668.

²³ On this point see Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An's claim to moral authority* (Albany, 2001), pp. 112–13; Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned violence in early China* (Albany, 1990), ch. 6; M. Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue*, and S. Kuriyama, *The expressiveness of the body and the divergence of Greek and Chinese medicine* (New York, 2002).

²⁴ On the religious, medical and philosophical uses of the notion of *shen* in China, see *Of self and spirits. Exploring shen in China*, eds Romain Graziani and Roel Sterckx, *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 29 (2007).

might at any moment manifest itself in the form of a physical desire or a particular emotion. In its refined form, it constitutes the foundation for spiritual exaltation.

As Hu Jiacong has shown clearly in a detailed inquiry on the composition of the *Guanzi*,²⁵ the Jixia academy played a pivotal role in the development of a new holistic discourse grounded in *qi*, thereby creating a continuum between medicine and philosophy, cosmology and physiognomy. The famous opening passage of chapter three of the *Huainanzi*, “Tian wen” 天文, describes *qi* as the primal stuff which, through a process of differentiation, gives birth to the universe and all living beings, plants, animals and humans. In one of his rhapsodies no doubt influenced by the chapters of the “Art of the mind” and ingeniously written in the form of a riddle—thus making constant reference to the subject without ever naming it—Xun Kuang (ca. 312–235 BC) relies on these foundations of Chinese cosmology and physiology. He describes a cloud transformed into a sage by increasing its density (of movement and form), by concentrating its halo and vapors:

When expanding, it forms a triad with Heaven and Earth,
And its power condenses into Yao or Yu.²⁶
Its distilled essence is thinner than a hair,
But in its expansion it fills the entire world.²⁷

The sage and the cloud are formed by the same essence. This remains the most concise expression of the fundamental substratum of all things and of the continuity between matter and mind. A “material” substance stores in itself a form of energy that can be transformed into something entirely spiritual by proper mental acumen. It is imaginable that Xun Kuang, who on a number of occasions uses the expression “Art of the mind” (*xinshu*) and who spent some of his formative years studying at the Jixia academy, to which he returned for a decade in his maturity as a renowned scholar, around 275–265 BC, is harking back to the

²⁵ Hu Jiacong, *Guanzi xintan*, *passim*. I cannot approve Nathan Sivin’s absurd rejection of the Jixia academy as a myth (see N. Sivin, “The myths of the Naturalists,” in *Medecine, philosophy and religion in ancient China* (Aldershot, 1995), ch. 4.

²⁶ Yao and Yu the Great, two paragons of steadfast virtue in the Confucian tradition, incarnate the ideal of enlightened governance. By the time of Xun Kuang, reference to them is a cliché, a sort of *image d’Epinal* in literati discourse.

²⁷ *Xunzi jijie*, ed. Wang Xianqian (Beijing, repr. 1988), 18.26.474. The poem on the cloud is in fact conceived as a riddle for speaking of the Dao, evoking its ubiquity and its dazzling speed as well as its nebulous and protean aspects.

foundational text, “Inward training.”²⁸ Let us now delve deeper into the ethical program of this arch-text.

Dating most likely from the 4th century BC, “Inward training” is a long meditative poem (approximately 1500 characters) which opens with a description of the formation of things and portrays the sage and the stars as formed from the same essence. Like the *Xunzi*, the author seems to admit that certain “material” substances contain a quintessential form of energy and envisions the universe as a continuum that relates the lowest things to divine beings (*gui* 鬼 and *shen* 神). Ideologically more sober than the *Xunzi*, the “Inward training” refuses the habitual hagiographical features of the sage sovereigns of the past. Xun Kuang was part of a later generation, a period when the cosmic models of absolute sovereignty became prominent, on the eve of the creation of the Chinese empire. In the following overture, “Inward training” portrays the sage from a purely genetic perspective:

Every time for all things, the essential energy
When it appears, gives them life;
When descending, it begets the five grains
And, when rising, produces the constellations.
When flowing amidst Heaven and Earth
We call it ghost or spirit.
It is stored in the breast
Of he whom we call sage.²⁹

The formations of essential energy vary according to their position in space. But whether speaking of stars, sages, spirits or grain, it is always the same substance that generates all possible forms of life, from the most concrete to the most animated. The generative power of *jing* 精, which appears as an elixir of life and as the most purified and refined form of vital breath, is best understood from a medical point of view, where it can specifically refer to the seminal fluid produced by the kidneys. “Inward training” attempts to connect us with this power and emphasizes the necessity of assimilating and interiorizing it (as opposed to the inculcation of principles). Wisdom results from this process of assimilation.

²⁸ Parallels between the “Inward training” and the *Xunzi* have been often outlined by Chinese scholars. See for instance Hu Jiacong’s comparative lists of similar passages between prominent thinkers from Jixia and the *Xunzi* in his *Guanzi xintan*, pp. 498–506.

²⁹ “Inward training” (GZJS 16.49.396).

In this perspective, the body is never reified nor treated as an object of study because physical force and mental potency emerge from a common substratum. There is not the body here and the mind there (this body which I am not, which is not me, but which I possess and control), constituted as two objective givens, but rather a configuration of energy animated by a diffuse power from which all actions, at every instant, draw their dynamism. It is a body in the first person, which regulates itself based upon its own reactions. In this study, I shall sometimes speak of “form” or of “corporeal form” (*xing* 形, a term repeatedly used by the “Xinshu” chapters, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Huainanzi*), in an effort to avoid the weighty and inert connotations of “body.”

But how, then, shall we understand the mind? The term *xin* 心 in Chinese designates a single organ for functions which are generally divided in Western culture between the heart and the mind. It refers to that organ, or rather that sense, through which we conceive and feel at the same time, and pertains as much to the realm of meaning as of emotion. The first consequence of this apparent unity is that the exploration of the self almost never leads to the formulation of an inner conflict (as between reason and feeling, desire and will, the animal and the reasonable parts within us), for *xin* is as much the faculty which decides as the organ which conforms, as much the command center as the seat of affects. The mind, which is also the heart, can only be pushed along and progressively conditioned by itself. It is either correctly or incorrectly oriented and while it might be influenced by lustful desires, lowered from its royal position, and subordinated to other organs, it is almost never subject to an internal separation in which two rival parts struggle for supremacy.³⁰

³⁰ We find in early texts persons confronted with contradictory choices, as between filial piety 孝 and loyalty 忠, but not facing the psychological complexity of inner division between diverging faculties, such as reason and sensibility, rightful moral perception and weakness of the will or impotency in action, such as the attitude epitomized by Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which was to inspire Saint Paul in his *Epistle to the Romans*: “Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor”; “I see the right way, approve it, and just do the opposite.” Mark Csikszentmihályi offers a detailed and interesting analysis of many moral quandaries recorded in early Chinese texts, that require “one to balance different impulses arising from different virtues” (*Material Virtue*, p. 255), among which the famous episode of Tian Chang's 田常 *coup d'état* in Qi in 481 BC (14th year of Duke Ai), tersely mentioned in the *Annals* and discussed in the *Hanshi waizhuan* 6.12, which divided the population between two rival kinds of loyalty. In the instances and templates culled by Csikszentmihályi (see *Material Virtue*, pp. 114 ff.), we do not witness a conflict of faculties, only the difficulty of a choice for the heart/mind. The character facing such a dilemma may even commit suicide so as not to endure the

Rather than speak in isolated terms of body and mind, it is more appropriate thus to speak of a corporeal way of life (one that leaves enough room for desires and emotions to dethrone the heart-mind from its pre-eminent position) and a spiritual way of life—two paths which are presented to us in the “Art of the mind” as in many other self-cultivation texts—either in the form of an attitude conditioned by the senses, spurred by desire, giddily hurrying after profit, scrambling for possession; or, on the other hand, a behavior regulated solely by the impetus of a composed and potent mind. These modes of behavior are associated with the common man on the one hand and the sage on the other. Sages are those able to reestablish within themselves the true hierarchical relationship between the elements composing their psycho-physical structure.

Meditative exercises teach how to develop a form of physiological consciousness. In the “Art of the mind” the corporeal form is spiritualized to the furthest extent and radiates the force which it accumulates and preserves. This internal Potency (*de* 德) leads to a long and flourishing existence and provides for an unhindered efficiency in one’s words and gestures, revealing that one has integrated the natural principle of the functioning of things or, to use the recurring formula, “has obtained the Dao” (*de dao* 得道). “Inward training,” in a remarkable homage to the functions and organs which constitute the human form, exalts in many a stanza the sage’s constitution: his flexible tendons, his luminous skin, his glowing complexion, his firm muscles and his vigorous members. The physical manifestations of wisdom are always associated with acts of internal concentration:

When one is capable of remaining regulated and quiescent,
One’s flesh is full and round,
One’s hearing sharp and vision clear,
With firm muscles and bones robust...³¹

shame and humiliation of not living up to his moral standard, but we never witness the typically Greek tragic essence of one’s inner multiplicity, of rebellious and conflicting feelings, or correct action performed with a sense of frustration (*enkrateia* in Greek), or the doing of an incorrect thing in spite of good feelings and a knowledge of good principles (*akrasia*, weakness of the will). We do, nonetheless, find examples in the *Huainanzi* of explicit inner conflicts between antagonistic desires. Confucius’s disciple, Zixia, explains how two rival desires battling in the heart (*xin zhan* 心戰) emaciated him: the desire for fame and wealth and the desire to abide by the rules of the wise kings of the past (HNZ “Yuan Dao,” 1.33).

³¹ “Inward training” (GZJS 16.49.404). Cf. also in the *Huainanzi* chapter “The Duty of cultivation” (Xiuwu), the description of the bodies of the ancient saintly kings: “Yao

When one has attained the Way
 One's traits reveal it, one's hair exudes it.³²

Various practices in the text are designed to help “obtain the Way” or “gain its Power”³³ through the uttermost refinement of the unsuspected resources everyone can draw from physiological inner processes. Most of the prescribed actions on oneself are referred to in terms borrowed from the field of politics,³⁴ of ritual and religion³⁵ or medicine.³⁶ The practitioner looks upon himself with the eyes of an administrator, a healer and an officer of rituals. The phases of this therapy vary according to different texts, but we recurrently find from the “Inward training” onwards the recommendation to vitalize the body by storing *cang* (藏), preserving (*shou* 守) and refining (*jing* 精) vital breath,³⁷ thereby achieving a state of deep calm (*jing* 靜) and concentration (*ding* 定); the necessity of mastering emotional responses through the expulsion of “positive” (excitement or joy) as well as “negative” affects (sadness or anger); and the celebration of a unity (*yi* 一) in apprehension and action, leading to sovereignty over one's inner processes and ascendance over one's entourage.

The first action in the work of the mind consists of expelling all turbulent and disturbing elements from the corporeal form. Emotions constitute an obstacle to the preservation and refinement of the basic vital breath:

had a halo of eight colors and his breath circulated freely through nine orifices... Shun had two pupils in each eye, which doubled his clairvoyance... Yu had three orifices in each ear, which is said to have given him a vast understanding... King Wen had three nipples, which was proof of his tremendous humanity” (HNZ 19.923).

³² “Inward training” (GZJS 16.49.408).

³³ Cf. the explanatory section of the “Art of the mind 1”: “Not to busy oneself’ refers to the Way: ‘producing talents’ refers to the Power. Nothing, then, separates the Way and the Power: thus, he who speaks of them cannot differentiate between them” (GZJS 13.36.328). The *de* is the manifest power of the *dao*, the efficient display of its hidden source.

³⁴ To order (*zhi* 治), to pacify (*an* 安), to control (*zhi* 制), to rectify (*zheng* 正).

³⁵ To purify (*jing* 精), to clean and sweep (*jie* 潔, *sao* 掃), to treat with attention and reverence (*jing* 敬).

³⁶ To cure (*zhi* 治) and to nurture (*yang* 養), to expel (*qu* 去) and dissipate (*jie* 解).

³⁷ Like the “Inward training,” the *Huainanzi* advocates the sparing use of one's *qi* and envisages the possibility of increasing one's energetic resources; see for instance HNZ ch. 7 “Jing shen” 精神, which details the causes of loss or gain of vital breaths; on the accumulation of breaths see ch. 17 “Shuo lin” 說林.

Clean the spirit's mansion [i.e.: the mind] with great deference,
 And the vital essence will arrive of itself.³⁸
 Empty yourself of desires
 And the spirit will enter the abode.³⁹
 If you wipe away what is unclean,
 Then the spirit will remain within you.⁴⁰

Affects, desires and emotions are modalities of vital energy in its unrefined form, and all have the ability to de-center the mind and thus to set it into chaotic motion (*luan* 亂).

Each time, the mind's fundamental disposition
 Is naturally filled and by itself abounds in energy;
 It spontaneously begets and accomplishes itself.
 The loss of this mind's fundamental disposition
 Is invariably due to sadness and joy, pleasure and anger, desire and the
 pursuit of profit.
 If one can reject them all,
 The mind will revert to its optimal state.⁴¹

Emotions and desires are criticized because they warp our perception of the world and our way of responding. Obtaining the Way (*de dao* 得道) means identifying oneself with something universal, the global process of things, whereas emotions such as joy or distress make us partial to our environment. They create a certain disposition rather than keeping us in the interior realm called “emptiness” (*xu*) in the “Baixin” and the “Xinshu xia.” In the realm of action, emotions engender rigid attitudes which are oftentimes out of touch with the issues at hand or the demands of the moment.⁴² In spite of an apparent spontaneity, affects are more than a brisk and unthought moment, they recount an entire history

³⁸ “Inward training” (GZJS 16.49.402).

³⁹ The dwelling-place is a metaphor for the mind which hosts the vital force in its superior form once it is cleaned and purified, similar to the way in which a mansion might receive an eminent guest. See as well GZJS 13.36.327: “The spirit is what is most noble. If a mansion is not appropriately clean, a noble will not stay in it. This is why it is stated: ‘The spirit cannot reside in an unclean house.’”

⁴⁰ “Art of the mind 1” (GZJS 13.36.323).

⁴¹ “Inward training” (GZJS 16.49.397).

⁴² Cf. chapter 21 of the *Xunzi*, “Dispelling what beclouds the mind” (Jiebi), where the author lists the causes responsible for beclouding the mind. The problem according to the author's diagnosis does not so much come from the nature of things we are drawn to as from the distortion created by the mind's prism. Here Xun Kuang picks up on well-known arguments from the period and borrows the most developed aspects of the thought of philosophers whom he criticizes elsewhere.

inscribed in the body. Internal activity attempts to erase this historicity along the lines of the sage who accumulates nothing:

In his reactions, nothing is pre-established;
In his movements, nothing is chosen.⁴³

The real spontaneity (*zi* 自), which is characteristic of the mind's optimal functioning, disappears with the rise of emotions when one's energy is lured to objects, drawn by something outside the corporeal form. The two possible uses of vital energy have their correlate in the two types of existence previously distinguished. Either one chooses to give free rein to one's emotions, which necessarily leads to the squandering of the seminal principle of internal rebuilding, or one chooses to preserve one's primary energy, channeling (*li* 理), cultivating and refining it through internal concentration in an effort to obtain a superior functioning of vital activity, an increased perceptive acuity, and internal peace.⁴⁴

The suppression of the self

Oddly enough, this great "internal undertaking" (another possible translation of "Neiye" 内業) is often limited to a physiological cleansing or an emotional hygiene which disregards the particular content of intentions or thoughts, or even an analysis of affects understood as singular phenomena in themselves. It is a form of internal purification, not a moral analysis. Expelling emotions is a means of freeing oneself from one's particularity, of getting rid of one's personal emotional profile. Regulating the physiological substratum of emotions does not imply questioning their meaning. This inner task is devoid of references to evil, contamination or fault, and instead focuses on failure or excess. This way of thinking defines a form of self-cultivation in which there is neither a moralistic tone nor the hint of a potential subject. Life is never understood according to the particular meaning that it might have for a given person. Only generic and impersonal characteristics

⁴³ "Art of the mind 1" (GZJS 13.36.326).

⁴⁴ This tendency to define wisdom according to the acuity of sensory processes exists in numerous texts from a wide variety of schools. On this subject see Roel Sterckx, "Le pouvoir des sens. Sagesse et perception sensorielle en Chine ancienne," *Cahier du centre Marcel Granet* 1 (Paris, 2003), 71–92.

are described such as organs, dynamism, causes of disorder and order, power and weakness, acuity and sickness.

Moral stipulations and ritual norms are also conspicuously absent in the “Art of the mind” and this aspect clearly distinguishes it from the recently excavated manuscript *Five activations* or *Five kinds of action* (*Wuxing pian* 五行篇), where self-cultivation is intimately linked to the practice of social virtues. In the “Art of the mind,” we find the fundamental assumption that by acting upon the very impulse of thought (*qi yi* 氣意), by placing our fundamental dispositions (those which precede and produce the contents of our thoughts and determine our words and actions) in a calm and concentrated atmosphere, our “form” will spontaneously follow an ethical path. By working on oneself, at the level of the mind and *on* the mind, one avoids any moral questioning or debate, since the mind is directly in contact with the very source of its power to act and to determine itself. Morality needs neither to be explained nor founded. It must be pointed out however—and this is the implicit argument of these chapters—that the values of life (strength, health, mastery, acuity) do not contradict social and moral norms; vital impulse and ethical tendency are fundamentally one. In this sense, social harmony is intimately linked to individual health. A major trend of self-cultivation that runs from the “Inward training” to the *Huainanzi* makes a fundamental link between the security and the well-being of the state and the health of the prince who rules it (for that matter, this orientation is hardly specific to the Chinese).

The reader must nonetheless be aware of the decisive fact that the functions of the mind which maintain a conscious and constitutive relationship with the self, which allow us to speak of ipseity—such as the active reflection upon oneself, the assertive remembrance of one’s thoughts and deeds, the history of one’s emotions, the search for one’s identity, the process of filtering certain representations—are all systematically absent from Daoist self-cultivation texts in the Warring States. The key elements of self-cultivation lend themselves more to a disappearance of the self than to an ipseity. The self is an organism without particularities; it manages the relationships between internal functions and external incitements without the interference of any personal qualities (based on personal tastes, preferences, habits or one’s personal experiences). Nothing corresponds to the ontological concept of the individual, understood as singular and unique (*hic*), nor to the psychological concept of the individual as characterized by self-awareness—a subjectivity which is aware of and makes reference

to itself (*ipse*). The self, individuated by its emotions and preferences, is dissolved into the sphere of vital activity regulated by the central organ, the heart/mind.

Ru self-cultivation and the five actions

The *Wuxing* is one of the many textual discoveries made over the past four decades which have considerably broadened our understanding of the scope of ancient Chinese thought and self-cultivation practices. This previously lost work, the existence of which had long been suspected by a reference in the *Xunzi*, along with a commentary to the *Wuxing* unearthed at Mawangdui, “provides a detailed moral psychology describing the process of the cultivation of the virtues, and [they] explain the virtues in terms similar to bodily humors.”⁴⁵

The *Wuxing* seems to date from the 4th century BC, a period when texts were still transmitted by restricted groups of masters and disciples.⁴⁶ One might characterize the tradition of the *Wuxing* as a moral culture of the individual based on Confucius’ thought as conveyed in the *Analects*.

⁴⁵ Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue*, p. 7. The author examines the provenance of the *Wuxing*, the circumstances of its discovery, its impact of on our understanding of ethical debate in early China, its connection with the school of Zisi and Mengzi, and the reasons it was criticized by Xun Kuang. It also provides a thoroughly annotated translation of the different versions of the text and its commentary and analyzes its content, style and vocabulary in great detail. Csikszentmihályi, drawing on the diverging researches initiated by Ding Sixin and Kageyama, challenges Li Xueqin’s views, according to which the *Wuxing* was composed by Zisi, wrongly deemed to be Confucius’s grandson according to a spurious genealogy of the Han.

⁴⁶ Published in 1980, the excavated text is a manuscript on silk found amidst a set of other texts on bamboo and silk in the outer coffin of tomb 3 at Mawangdui, Hunan, sealed in 168 BC and found in 1973. In 1993 an older version of the *Wuxing*, without the partial commentary found at Mawangdui, was found in a tomb near the site of Guodian in modern Hubei province. Since it is thought to have been buried around 300 BC and certainly before 278 BC, the *Wuxing* was very likely composed during the 4th century. According to Csikszentmihályi, the *Wuxing* predates the *Mencius*, and the *Mencius* predates the commentary to the *Wuxing*. Since the commentary of this text was probably composed and recopied between 207 and 195 BC, and given the fact the medium on which it was inscribed (long bamboo slips and silk) was a precious one, we may assume it was a quite important text transmitted and discussed throughout the 3rd century (cf. Csikszentmihályi, *Material Virtue*, p. 64). While the date of its composition remains unclear, it is impossible today to reflect on self-cultivation without taking this text into account. It is exemplary in that it reveals certain elements of thought from the Warring States period that archeology has allowed us to integrate into our understanding of the origins of philosophical discourse in China and of its ties with the medical and meditative milieus.

In spite of its moral orientation contrasting with the “Art of the mind,” the *Wuxing*⁴⁷ seems to tacitly assume the impersonal conception of the self. The radical approach of this brief treatise understands the human being as an assemblage of processes which may be activated—processes whose description completely undermines any notion of an individual self. The training devoted to internalizing moral virtues is the condition for the activation of a spiritual and moral Power (*de*) or Virtue. The ordinary forms of goodness and morality can thus be sublimated to this Virtue through various forms of internalization. The *Wuxing* describes the internal processes through which one accesses the five fundamental virtuous dispositions: sense of humanity or benevolence (*ren* 仁), justice or righteousness (*yi* 義), perspicacity or intelligence (*zhi* 智), spirit of ritual or ritual propriety (*li* 禮)⁴⁸ and wisdom (*sheng* 聖). Each virtue results from a chain of moods, emotions and perceptions whose order is defined according to its final outcome. The text begins with five fundamental propositions. By the repetition of brief formulaic and easily memorized expressions, a distinction is made between simple action (*xing* 行) and action out of Virtue (*de zhi xing* 德之行). The *Wuxing* thus differentiates genuinely virtuous actions—actions that stem from moral considerations—from actions which are merely compatible with morals but are not done with virtue in mind. This is done without pre-defining the meaning of either of these two notions.

When benevolence forms within, we can say that Virtue is activated;
 When it does not form within, one can simply speak of its action.
 When righteousness forms within, we can say that Virtue is activated;
 When it does not form, one can simply speak of its action.
 When ritual propriety forms within, we can say that Virtue is activated;

⁴⁷ The text was edited and transcribed in the *Guodian Chumu zhujian* (Beijing, 1998), pp. 149–54. For the sake of concision and clarity, I rely on the Guodian version with a few exceptions in favor of the Mawangdui variant. I do not deal here with the question of divergences between the two editions and the textual difficulties raised by the two manuscripts.

⁴⁸ Confucius had already imagined that human relationships could become harmonious and graceful through an intelligent study of ritual forms. The gestures of greeting, the different ways of positioning oneself in a ceremony, sitting at a banquet, placing one’s foot, one’s bearing and rank, all gestures, manners and words which structure life in society and regulate relationships, all of this perfectly internalized would allow for development within a community without effort, hypocrisy or misconduct. All of the members of the entourage would thus evolve ideally as if in a ballet, progressing in a well-ordered sequence of gestures and words, whose choreography was to be exhaustively recorded in the ritual canon.

When it does not form, one speaks simply of action.
 When perspicacity forms within, we can say that Virtue is activated;
 When it does not, one can simply speak of its action.
 When wisdom forms within, we can say that Virtue is activated;
 When it does not, one can simply speak of its action.⁴⁹

Through a set of parallel statements and the repetition of a formula in the positive and negative mode, this opening passage alludes to five virtues which are familiar to readers of Confucius's *Analects* and inserts them into a discourse where they do not designate accomplishments in themselves, but rather points of departure for the realization of a superior form of moral potency. These five moral dispositions are directly associated with an act of interiorization. A key expression in this work is the *de zhi xing* 德之行, the activation of moral Potency or Virtue, by means of which moral qualities (humanity, justice, ritual propriety, intelligence and wisdom) take on a heightened fullness, as if it were possible to integrate them into one's person and thereby move beyond morality defined by external conformity to moral standards. We are no longer in a moral world where one must simply and strictly abide by proper normative conduct (by simply "acting"). Virtue is the apex where the five moral dispositions culminate and converge. It is no longer a question of defining the distinctive traits of these virtues but of understanding that each of them is capable, when taking form inside, of activating this superior Virtue called *de* 德. Thus such an ostensibly neutral and descriptive heading implicitly encourages the gentleman to internalize these orientations and transform himself into a sovereign man (*junzi* 君子).

The workings of Virtue:
 When these five qualities come to an accord, we call it "Virtue,"
 When only four of them are in accord, we call it "goodness."
 Goodness is the Way of Man,
 Virtue, the Way of Heaven.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ We adopt for the last line the Mawangdui version. This makes more sense, though the Guodian version also has its defenders.

⁵⁰ This most likely makes reference to the five virtues listed above, less wisdom (*sheng*). In Mencius, they are the four germs (*sidian* 四端) of morality in the heart, which lead to these four virtues. On this point, see Li Cunshan "Cong jianben wuxing dao boshu wuxing," *Guodian chujian guoji xueshu yanjiuhui lunwenji* (Wuhan, 2000), pp. 204–48.

Virtue is the spontaneous result of internalizing and organizing the five moral qualities. It is not one among many moral qualities. But the way each one functions within us once it has been integrated and blended in with the others. One is reminded here of the notion of justice in book IV of Plato's *Republic*, where it is described as the foundation for the three virtues, wisdom, courage and temperance. Inherent within each of these virtues, justice produces their natural equilibrium and ensures their own functioning.⁵¹ Justice is therefore the ultimate virtue ensuring that each particular virtue find its place, its ability to come forth and to be preserved. Let us now look at the third paragraph:

The man in whom these five kinds of action take form within and are practiced at the right Time, we call a nobleman (*jun[zi]* 君子).
When the gentleman sets his mind on the way of the nobleman,
We call him an "aspiring gentleman" (*zhishi* 志士).⁵²

But what exactly is this internalization of a moral quality, what does it mean to "shape it from within" 形於內? While this inner gesture is neither explicitly defined nor exemplified, it may be construed in opposition with the mere habit or constraint of passively observing external standards. It is a way of being the autonomous agent of one's behavior, a result of the authentic will to act in a certain way and not merely in accordance with this way. To serve this ambitious purpose, different sequences of feelings and dispositions are posited which culminate in the active endorsement of a virtue. Such sequences might serve as spontaneous points of departure which would orient one's thought and behavior. The human being appears to be the impersonal site of internal configurations that the mind may manipulate, connect or control so that Virtue (*de*) may blossom within. The sections which follow are equally complex, with their lists replete with seemingly logical contra-

⁵¹ "In any case, seen from this perspective, it looks more like a sort of agreement and harmony than the qualities which were previously examined" (Plato, *The Republic*, 430e).

⁵² We follow here the silk version of the Mawangdui manuscript in order to restore the character *zi* 子 missing after *jun* 君 and reestablish the classical expression in the Ru milieu referring to the morally superior man, the *junzi* 君子. This incarnation of moral and spiritual power is superior to another type of man, the *shi* 士, the gentleman who stands at the lowest degree in the hierarchy of nobility, the knight whose expertise in arms was gradually replaced by the arts of the brush during the Warring States. Transposed onto a moral order, the *shi* finds himself below the *junzi* and aspires to become like him. The term *de* 德 is still associated with nobility, but the notion in this case serves to establish a hierarchy between men on the path of Virtue and spiritual accomplishment.

dictions, as if the authors took pleasure in playing with the traditional notions of moral thought and reworked them on a dialectical model. Each notion can only be defined in relation to the others and its place within the enumerations. None of the virtues are sufficient in themselves; all require a process of interiorization.⁵³ The exclusive cultivation of a virtue can lead to vice if not offset by the practice of a complementary virtue. The choice of the appropriate virtue is determined by particular circumstances, and the use of such a virtue in turn requires the introduction of another. The latter virtue then gives rise to the necessity of yet another virtue. In some situations, it is propitious to join goodness and benevolence, in other cases perspicacity and benevolence.

Toward a wordless world?

Whether assimilating vital energy by reverting to a state of deep calm, as the “Art of the mind” exhorts, or internalizing the five virtues in order to reach a superior moral potency, as in the *Wuxing*, we seem to always remain in a world where language stands at the periphery of the sage’s concern, as if the world of wisdom in China were fundamentally non-discursive and non-dialectical, and that seems as much the case for the period of the Warring States as for subsequent periods.⁵⁴ The extrinsic role of language—when it is not rejected outright as a hindrance—is flagrant in most philosophical texts portraying the sage, whether they be from Ru or from Daoist traditions. This salient feature of self-cultivation is also a perennial aspect of Chinese thought, and may partly account for many specific modes of discourse in early China, from the

⁵³ Confucius speaks with Zilu on the dangers of letting the mind become clouded by practicing only one virtue: see *Analects* 17.8. The *Huainanzi* also puts on guard against the danger of sticking to one virtue and offers various models of behavior: see G. Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s claim to moral authority*, p. 116.

⁵⁴ The chapter “Purifying the mind” (Baixin) of the *Guanzi* states: “Thus the sage detests what is written and scorns what is spoken.” Confucius’s reticence to speak is well-known and was subtly analyzed by Jean Levi in his biography *Confucius* (Paris, 2002). One might also make reference in this case to the story of wheelwright Pian in the *Zhuangzi*, chapter “Tian dao” 天道, who professes to Duke Huan his scorn of writings from the past. For him books are no more than the dregs of the men of old (ZZJS, 13.490–491). See also the *Annals of Sire Lü*: “Such a man (who is able to preserve his nature and attain the level of the spirit) acquires the confidence of another without speaking a word, acts justly without making any plans, succeeds without planning in advance” (LSCQ I/2.4).

propensity to pithy aphorisms and concise sayings to the extensive use of diagrams and figures. In other words, language is far from being a privileged mode of intervening in the work of self-cultivation, and this fact should elicit a reflection on the status of self-cultivation texts themselves. We must recognize the fact that they have lost a significant part of their coherence once detached from the exercises (*gongfu* 工夫) which accompanied them. Indeed they are at best the fading traces and imprints of gestures and postures that conditioned a shift toward a modified form of consciousness. And it is precisely from that perspective that one is enabled to see the world afresh, and perceive how language interferes.

Self-cultivation texts are in general extremely brief, do not teem with demonstrations, logical arguments or systematic presentations. They do not focus on the hows and the whys of this world, but seek practical solutions to enhancing one's vital possibilities and moral power and putting the mind in control of bodily and mental processes. If we do not make sense of this subordination of theoretical discourse to practical efficacy and vital imperatives, and if we do not shed be it only a flickering light on certain radical stands against logic and language, we will miss the critical dimension of self-cultivation that stands as a preamble to the reform of the self. Nor shall we be able to silence the recurring reproaches and objections raised against Chinese philosophical texts by most Western philosophers, whose analytical minds cannot help but see Chinese texts as fraught with contradictions, deficient in logical rigor, vague to the point of obscurity, and lacking in clear definitions and demonstrations. If early Chinese texts were produced in radically different conditions from those of modern times, it is not only because of the material factor of the medium used to write, which entails its own constraints, but because texts are never really freed from the constraints of orality. Many self-cultivation texts that we label today as philosophical, like the "Art of the mind," may have been only notes on lectures of the master, or instructions for collective meditation. Even when duly composed, the general movement of thought in these texts, their rhythm, their tempo and temporality, develop according to the standards of oral speech. This is a major constraint, which certainly accounts for many of the features regarded as logical deficiencies in ancient Chinese thought. A text often unfolds according to associations of ideas without any systematic rigor, it eludes and resumes ideas at will instead of exposing them one by one—all features that are typical of speech, even if in written notes it was always possible to optimize the composition, add introductory parts, conclusions, or transitions.

In salient contrast with Greek and Hellenistic philosophers, be they Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics or even Sceptics, authors of self-cultivation texts in China never seem to assert that logical validity of discourse, argumentative consistency, or assumption of shared universal truths are a means to deliver oneself from every possible source of outer tyranny, be it received customs, socially taught beliefs, religious practices, social status or political conditions.⁵⁵ The use of discourse to achieve self-fulfillment stands on the outskirts of the early Chinese philosophical landscape. Elaborate reasoning, logical rigor and commitment to rational argument can but rarely be glimpsed in this context. This does not mean that rational arguments or theoretical statements are absent from this period of Chinese thought, but they never take in self-cultivation texts the form of therapeutic exercises consisting in the healing of passions or emotions through dialogue or discourse of the self (with the sole exception perhaps of the *Zhuangzi*, as we shall see later). Among spiritual exercises, we do not find a rhetorical or dialectical training in the art of speaking and debating. When someone transcends his own individuality in a superior principle, he is outside language, in the silent processes of the natural order, never in something akin to the Greek *logos*. The superior form of intelligence or knowledge is an alertness of the sensory apparatus, a faculty of seeing and hearing, far from the conception of thought as an inner and silent dialogue between the mind and itself. Chinese self-cultivation texts are much more inclined to emphasize the limits of language, the weakness of argumentation and the impossibility of imparting the ultimate experience of the spiritual forces that animate the world and which may rest ephemerally within our corporeal form when the latter is made as pure as a sacrificial vessel.

This suspicion of language and its ontological impotency are recurrently highlighted in the various philosophical traditions. Daoist-oriented self-cultivation texts certainly stand in the *avant-garde* of this general attack against discourse and the pretention of language to convey an authentic experience of reality or an adequate description of things as they are in the light of Heaven. It partly accounts for the split between two conceptions of philosophy. From the standpoint of classical Western philosophy, self-cultivation is merely an art of wisdom or a form of mysticism, in great part because of its non-discursive view of reality.

⁵⁵ Martha Nussbaum has examined these practical and logical aspects in Greek and Roman schools of philosophy in *The therapy of desire. Theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics* (Princeton, N.J., 1994).

What makes the essence of self-cultivation is the choice of a certain way of life, the experience of certain frames of mind, the embodiment of inner dispositions, all of which can hardly be expressed in words. This is manifest when we turn to the descriptions of the intuition of the Way or the experience of the spirit (*shen* 神) in early texts such as the *Daode jing* or the “Art of the mind,” not to mention innumerable later sources drawing on them. These texts do not recount the author’s subjective experience but rather define the possible uses of the mind through an anonymous and impersonal discursive form. The maxims of the *Daode jing* on the inefficiency or the impotence of language were quoted, assumed and commented upon throughout the Chinese tradition: The sage practices “teaching without words” (*buyan zhi dao* 不言之道);⁵⁶ “He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know.”⁵⁷ Of the ruler it is said, “Hesitant, he does not utter words lightly,”⁵⁸ and chapter 23 reminds us that “to use words but rarely is to be natural,”⁵⁹ both perhaps echoing the untranslatable pun attributed to Confucius in the *Analects*, *renzhe, qi yan ye ren* 仁者其言也詘.⁶⁰ “A man endowed with humanity is slow and dull when he speaks.” The *Annals of Sire Lü* assert that a man able to preserve his nature and attain the spirit is trusted by other men without having to speak.⁶¹ In the “Art of the mind,” interaction with things requires that one quiet the solicitations of desire and interest: “Get rid of everything personal and selfish in you; do not speak, and the clairvoyance of the spirits will remain present.”⁶² The man who possesses the Way, as is suggested further on, “responds to the world as if he were its partner: such is the art of ‘following in silence.’” It is not so much self-knowledge that is being considered (whether it refers to motivations, feelings, desires or the understanding of one’s own experience) but the ability to act upon one’s internal functioning (begetting emotions, gathering one’s attention, adjusting one’s thoughts to changes, expelling biases and private points of view). Even cognition seems to be conceived in order to annihilate the individual rather than to construct a personal identity.

⁵⁶ *Daode jing* 2 and 43.

⁵⁷ *Daode jing* 56.

⁵⁸ *Daode jing* 17, trans. D.C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching* (Baltimore 1963, repr. Penguin Classics), p. 21.

⁵⁹ Trans. D.C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 28.

⁶⁰ *Lunyu* 12.3 (*Lunyu yizhu*, p. 124).

⁶¹ *LSCQ* I/2.4.

⁶² “Art of the mind 1” (*GZJS* 13.36.325).

Along the lines of the *Daode jing* and its famous opening statement, the *Zhuangzi* teems with radical anti-intellectual slogans: “The great Way has no name. The great debate does not speak” 夫大道不稱，大辯不言。⁶³ The one-footed Master Wang Tai 王駘 is described as teaching without uttering any words; yet, his students come to him empty and return home filled 虛而往，實而歸。⁶⁴

How can we account for the advocacy of a minimal use of language and the mistrust of speech in early Chinese texts and more particularly in self-cultivation milieus? Underlying some critical statements against language, in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, we may sense a kind of sociological intuition that language internalizes society’s preferences and traditional values at the expense of a full grasp of things as they genuinely are. From this well-known perspective, language is an instrument in the inculcation of beliefs and behavioral norms, and it accounts for the dichotomies according to which we face the outward world. A critical attitude toward language allows for the discovery of the most subtle forms of influence of the milieu on oneself. Zhuangzi’s second chapter “All things on a par” (“Qiwu lun” 齊物論) shows us that things are ordered according to the categories “this” and “that,” “high” and “low,” “left” and “right,” “good” and “bad,” and all these spatial and logical indicators are the foundations of political authority within us. These dichotomies are not mere oppositions. They are a way of shaping our experience of life through a drastic selection in the field of our sensitivity, to such an extent that it eventually becomes impossible to admit there are many other possible ways. Now there is an infinite variety of worlds that are all equal and all absolute in themselves, since none of them may be a yardstick or a standard for the others. Then what appear as contradictions may be seen as variety. Meditation in the *Zhuangzi* is a means to revert to the moment within us before the conversion of our mind to a discursive regime and the subsequent categorization of things.

We could say as a general hypothesis that the universal principle of order, the Way, is found in nature, in a realm outside the jurisdiction of *logos*. There is no universal truth or ultimate knowledge to be found in language. The sage finds clarity of vision in the attuning of his sensory abilities and the refinement of his stock of vital resources, not in the

⁶³ ZZJS 2.83.

⁶⁴ ZZJS 5.187.

sphere of a pure conscience severed from physiological processes. Even within the Confucian tradition, the expression of ultimate order was located in ritual, in the manners and gestures or words that it commands, not in language itself as providing the logical structure of reality.⁶⁵

Now, the rejection of language, seen as an obstacle to true knowledge and clear-sighted vision of things as they are, is intimately associated in most self-cultivation texts with the suppression of the self. In spite of certain differences in the diverse and rival textual lineages, one general and prominent feature of the sage is selflessness. The interiorization of the principle of totality (the “obtainment” of the Way) is achieved at the expense of understanding the self. The self is eclipsed from discourse in order to make a place for a vital activity pushed to its greatest heights and spreading spontaneously and impersonally like Nature. In other words, self-cultivation does not construct an individual identity but dissolves the individual. The wise sovereign avoids action *and* discourse. Even when the Daoist theory of non-action (*wuwei* 無爲) is reworked within a Ru frame, as is the case in the chapter “The Duty of cultivation” (“Xiuwu” 修務) of the *Huainanzi*, the definition of authentic action remains explicitly impersonal:

What I mean by “non-action” is what takes place when private individual intentions do not interfere with the common way all things follow, when desires and appetites do not distort the proper methods, when one undertakes affairs by complying with the natural order, when one rises by following one’s potential and lets oneself be spontaneously driven by the propensity of things so that neither cunning nor artifice may manifest themselves.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Cf. for instance the *Zuozhuan* or the *Xunzi*’s praise of *li* as a cosmic and social principle of order and harmony in chapter 19 “Lilun” (Discussion on ritual). In the *Zuo commentary*, ritual is that which informs proper human conduct; it is said to be the foundation of life, the key to the preservation of the self and of the State, and the guiding principle of the cosmos. Mark E. Lewis provides an insightful analysis into this aspect of ritual in the *Zuozhuan* in *Writing and authority in early China*, pp. 132–39.

⁶⁶ *HNZ* 19.634. On the possible translations of the title of this chapter, cf. Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue*, p. 24 n. 24. Anne Cheng rightly notices: “We find in this chapter an admirable and successful effort to reveal the common concept which is at the source of Daoism and Confucianism. This desire for a synthesis under the aegis of Daoism reflects well the Huang-Lao intellectual current of which the *Huainanzi* is undoubtedly one of the best representatives” (*Philosophes taoïstes*, vol. 2, p. 909). This effort to reconcile the ideas of Daoism with the demands of personal study, noble efforts and a desire to act for the sake of others without reserve, even to the extent of neglecting one’s health and accelerating one’s demise, is nonetheless somewhat paradoxical in a chapter on self-cultivation.

As Griet Vankeerberghen rightly reminds us: “The *Huainanzi* is anxious to dismiss the impression that through *wuwei* it is recommending disengagement and motionlessness.”⁶⁷ What is advocated is selfless agency and not passivity in action. The sage is less an eminent personality than a non-self, an actor without intentionality. In the *Huainanzi*, the conception of *wuwei* consists in actions springing from within 出於中, a source markedly distinct from the self (*ji* 己). The inside of the sage is conceived in non-subjective terms, it is what binds him to the entire universe. The self is regarded as something negative, as a “human construct that bears no relation to the agent’s true nature.”⁶⁸ The self is what hinders the possibility of genuine moral action. By “non-action,” the *Huainanzi* means casting aside the intentional self when acting, leaving out of consideration the sphere of personal interests and tastes that define the individual in his singularity.⁶⁹

In the “Art of the mind,” the spirit and the Way are not grasped dialectically through a reflective process, but stored and received in a purified and empty mind. It is a state of calm concentration of one’s inner activity rather than the working of the intellect which is necessary for gaining access to the spiritual dimension of the world. When the “Inward training” says that the mind meets or welcomes 迎 the Dao, it points out the connection between the body’s principle of unity and the dynamic principle underlying all reality. The presence of the Dao in the mind or in the bosom 胸 of the sage signifies the optimal interaction between the sphere of internal workings and the outside world.

Authentic knowledge, then, does not require mental speculation nor the explanation of natural phenomena; it is merely conditioned by a calm and silent concentration and the refinement of vital energy into spirit-like Power: “The great Way, one may draw peace from it, but one cannot explain it,”⁷⁰ and, further on, “This is why the sovereign man . . . leaves behind reason and intelligence.”⁷¹ In the chapter “Purifying the mind” we find the following instructions: “Remain firm and dwell in waiting, be open and available without dividing yourself, and in this calm you will naturally clarify.”⁷² Because these spiritual exercises

⁶⁷ Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s claim to moral authority*, p. 97.

⁶⁸ Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s claim to moral authority*, p. 98.

⁶⁹ See in particular chapter 9, “The art of mastery” 主術.

⁷⁰ “Art of the mind 1,” *GZJS* 13.36.325.

⁷¹ “Art of the mind, I,” *GZJS* 13.36.325.

⁷² “Purifying the Mind, I,” *GZJS* 13.38.341.

dispense with language, there is no rupture in the continuum between life and knowledge, between the basic vital energy and the quasi divine power of the mind. Knowledge appears as a capacity to see all things afresh, to envision the world as a whole, leaving behind what usually muddles or befuddles the mind (worries, habits, desires, restlessness); it is a keen perception, irrigated by the most concentrated form of energy. In “Inward training” the description of the cognitive process intimately links the vital breath (*qi* 氣) and the impulse of the mind to meaningful expression (*yi* 意). Knowledge is also described as the intelligent manifestation of an ever-expanding vital force:

When energy is channeled, it begins to generate;
With this generation, thought appears;
With thought, knowledge emerges;
With knowledge, you can bring this process to a halt.⁷³

Knowledge is considered from the dynamic perspective of vital breath rather than that of a subject with cognitive faculties or of an object of study. Life and knowledge of vital activity are inseparable. The awareness of one’s inner processes cannot be considered knowledge of the individual self. Rather, one empties oneself of all that individuates in order to focus one’s attention on the underlying forces which makes man live, breathe, think, know and act.

Men all desire knowledge
But no one seeks to know what makes one know.
Knowledge, knowledge!
Hurl it away, far beyond the seas! Don’t let it abduct your self!
Rather than search for it, better empty oneself of it.
Upright men do not search for it
And thus are able to remain empty and vacuous.⁷⁴

Objects of knowledge are thus set aside in favor of the understanding by which knowing is made possible, as if mental activity turned back on itself in order to shed light on its very nature. Other texts suggest that when it is turned toward the external world, authentic knowing is a sheer reflective activity in the optical sense. The well-known analogy of the mind like a mirror is to be found for the first time in chapter seven of the *Zhuangzi*. “Responding to emperors and kings” (“Ying

⁷³ “Inward training,” *GZJS* 16.49.400.

⁷⁴ “Art of the mind, 1,” *GZJS* 13.36.324.

diwang” 應帝王), and expresses the injunction to empty oneself of any content:

Stop acting as a manager of names, do not be a storehouse for schemes, do not play the one in charge, do not play the master of wisdom. Fuse with the infinite and roam without a trace. Avail yourself of what you've received from Heaven but do not seek profit from it; remain empty, nothing more! The utmost man uses his mind like a mirror: a mirror does not let in nor walk along with what comes and goes of itself; it responds without retaining. Thereby he can overcome things and remain unharmed.⁷⁵

This analogy is to be understood primarily as an attitude of protection and independence from the outside world. Comparing the mind to a mirror implies that external happenings merely graze the surface of the body and never find a way inside. The mirror-like perceptiveness of the mind is not beclouded nor jaundiced by inner moods. The *Huainanzi* reemploys this analogy to express the ability of the sage to respond to persons and situations spontaneously without the distortions caused by memory or personal inclinations. Following the *Mengzi* and the *Zhuangzi*, as is not infrequently the case for its best ideas, the *Xunzi* compares the centered mind to a clear and unrippled surface of water, reflecting everything without ever being affected by what it reflects.⁷⁶ The metaphor of a surface of water is even more apt than that of a mirror since it can be stirred and disturbed and thus may reflect a distorted image or no image at all. In contrast to the mirror, it provides an analogy for the different states of the mind and not simply the normative state of limpid reflection. The momentary imprints of things leave no trace and cannot prevent the reflection of new images. In the *Xunzi* this analogy serves a purpose slightly different from the *Zhuangzi*: it describes the synthetic function of the mind in its relations with the outside world, able to hold everything in its purview. It expresses the synthetic unity of impressions and thoughts by a mind able to “digest” and assimilate everything that appears before it while still holding to its capacity to encompass them. In this regard, it marks a clear-cut contrast with the fasting, emptiness, and forgetfulness of the mind advocated in the *Zhuangzi*.

⁷⁵ ZZJS 7.307.

⁷⁶ *Xunzi jijie*, XV.21.395. For a Confucianist appropriation of the mirror metaphor which valorizes the polishing of the mind, cf. *Huainanzi*, ch. 19 “Duty of cultivation” (Xiuwu).

Thinking or reflecting, then, no longer signifies stirring one's thoughts, but rather the capacity to let the images of the world imprint themselves on an unmoved mind, as on a *tabula rasa*. The only active role which the individual plays in this form of knowledge consists in maintaining one's calm, persevering with a clear mind. Knowledge is thus tied to the quality of one's perception, which is in turn conditioned by quietude. The problem of cognition is posed in terms of emotional dispositions. That knowledge emerges through calm and concentration reveals to what extent it was conceived from the outset as a form of reception as opposed to a methodological construction. The "Art of the mind" is less concerned with the mind's thoughts, transformed by the drive for knowledge, than with inciting us to focus on the source of the activity which produces our thoughts and dispositions—to focus on this source and peacefully settle in it. In this sense, one might suggest that the work of the mind is less speculative than specular.⁷⁷

The "Mind within the mind" seen as a form of non-mystical meditation

Who, or rather what, within ourselves is responsible for accomplishing this task? The mind of course, but in what sense, in what mode? "Inward training" provides an answer to this question:

If my mind is regulated, my senses are as well;
 If my mind is peaceful, my senses are as well.
 What regulates them is the mind;
 What appeases them is the mind.
 The mind harbors another mind:
 Inside the mind there is still another mind.
 For this mind within the mind
 Thought precedes words.
 After thought, dispositions appear;
 After dispositions come words.⁷⁸

The reference to two minds, one which contains and another which is contained, corresponds to a distinction between the mind as the object of inward training, the physical organ upon which one works, and the mind as a principle of action and a command center, apprehended prior

⁷⁷ Cf. again "Purifying the mind": "When speculation gains in subtlety, clairvoyance increasingly declines" (GZJS 13.38.344).

⁷⁸ GZJS 16.49.403.

to discursive thought. The mind is first conceived as a site which can be attended to and purified and, in this sense, is compared to a residence or an abode (*she* 舍, *gong* 宮), whereas the “inner mind” seems to designate the agent which initiates the cleaning process. In fact, there is no duality in this process, any more than there is duality of body and mind, rather there is a differentiated unity. In phenomenological terms, we could rephrase this argument in the following manner: when I see or hear, I am aware of the physical phenomena outside me. But at the same time, I am able to develop an awareness of my internal perception of these phenomena and can refine it through attention and calm. Even more, I can focus my silent attention on that which, within me, is listening or observing; not only do I see or hear something, but I am able to feel myself as a form of vital activity which perceives things and perceives itself within the self-same process of reflection. The consciousness of outer objects is coupled by an awareness of this perceptive activity. This reflective form of listening or seeing does not constitute a field of knowable objects as in the realm of direct perception. When the mind shifts its attention from the natural objects of perception to the act of perception itself through which it relates to these objects, one does not have to divide oneself internally but rather one discovers the fundamental unity of vital activity.

It is precisely this primordial mind which is called upon in the transformation of the self described by the “Art of the mind” and to which the above passage refers in a deliberately paradoxical way. The mind perceives its own activity from an inner space which is evoked as a “center” (*zhong* 中), as the imaginary site where one is united or concentrated. There the mind frees itself from the normal sphere of transitive consciousness and turns toward a contemplation of its operations within which there is no distance between the awareness of these acts and the acts themselves; they are unified in a shared attention. Whereas ordinary transitive consciousness refers to physical phenomena (forms, sounds, odors), “the mind within the mind” relates to mental phenomena (the hearing of a sound, the smelling of an odor), to the workings of inner activity. The “mind within the mind” is in direct contact with the source of our internal power of seeing. It is neither solicited by nor available for the interactions between the mind and those things which disperse and exhaust our vital power outside the body. The “mind within the mind” is freed from external relationships and becomes completely accessible in the moments when one’s attention turns back on itself, moments when the constant appeal of the

outside world is held at a distance. The almost obsessive reiterations in the “Art of the mind” of the benefits of stillness and peace of mind, the repeated urging to dispel affections and reflections and revert to a state of emptiness,⁷⁹ remind us that the “mind within the mind” can only be fully attained by calming our tendency to constantly worry and busy ourselves, to dissipate our focus on the present and rush headlong into the blinding and deafening world of things.

The intensity of this original mind increases as intentional consciousness decreases. When one is able through meditation to completely overcome the first mind, that of intentional consciousness (be it on the plane of volition, desire or simply cognition), then the activity of the mind, liberated from its tension toward the outside, stabilizes and concentrates on itself.⁸⁰ As the mind’s intentionality no longer focuses on a particular object nor projects itself onto it, it is able to evolve purely through internal attention. When internal attention is focused (*zhuan* 專) uniquely on the stream of activity emanating from inside—a field of energy of which this attention is an integral part, as a kind of reverberation—then the vital breath, entirely lodged within, spontaneously purifies itself. The excitement of the *qi* under the spur of desire or the lure of outward beings is soothed, and an unexpected surplus of inner resources fortifies the apprehension of the mind’s activity. The mind then suffuses with energy, as the “Inward training” asserts. The

⁷⁹ “Art of the mind 1”: “Man establishes himself through force; he strives to excel; he delights in his capacities; he is motivated by reasons. The sage dispenses with all this. Dispensing with all this, he stands apart from everything else. Because he stands apart, he remains in a state of vacuity. And vacuity is the beginning of all things” (GZJS 13.36.330).

⁸⁰ Here we are taking up the concept of intentionality in the phenomenological sense of the word as defined by the Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano (1838–1917), the professor of Husserl and the father of phenomenology (cf. *Psychologie von empirischen Standpunkt*, Hamburg, 1874 and 1911). It is to Brentano that we owe our modern and now classic formulation of intentionality. This definition would inspire the first phenomenological analyses of Husserl as well as the works of Alexius Meinong and Kasimir Twardowski on the representation of mental objects. It is, of course, this modern meaning of intentionality to which we are referring when we speak of the end of intentional life in order to attain calm in the “Inward training.” Intentionality does not simply have a volitional meaning but makes reference to consciousness of any object, any tension of the mind toward an object of representation. Husserl would then make of intentionality the distinctive property of mental phenomena as opposed to physical phenomena. In the texts of self-cultivation, the mind which lets go of the intentional order and turns its attention toward its very grasping is not a second internal consciousness within the act of grasping physical phenomena (its primary object), nor is it a thinking consciousness which envisions the phenomenal self. It is a fundamental mind which discovers itself as a purely vital activity without any reference to the self.

perceptive, physical and cognitive effects can thus be immediately felt (we all know *a contrario* as a universal component of human experience that the increase of fatigue, hunger, weariness, or sensitivity to cold are the natural outcomes of an inconsiderate outflow of *qi*, caused by strong emotions, strenuous motions or emission of semen.)

From the descriptions of meditative experiences in the “Art of the mind,” it seems the mind may in certain moments perceive itself as a form of spiritual energy which, liberated from objects, reflects and refines itself. However we may conceive this reversion to the original mind, it should be noted that this meditation does not lead to the constitution of a personal subject—either as a singularity to be explored or a will to be realized. The activity through which the mind discovers itself is none other than the expression of one’s purest energy. Through the progressive awareness of one’s hidden source of activity one does attend to oneself, but such a meditative approach does not develop within the context of an individual personality which is limited or defined according to what it is not. The full realization of man’s innate potentialities avoids any notion of self-knowledge. Listening to the “mind within the mind” can on the contrary be best understood as a kind of reverberation of the mind’s activity when it focuses solely on its inner dynamism and the source of all its various operations. The mind can see itself seeing. The practitioner experiences the pure stream of life, and the peaceful focus of the mind on its own power is sufficient to transform the intensity and the quality of this life breath. In this “frame of mind,” all the elements that constitute an individual as a social person with a name, a lineage, a status, but also with definite desires, habits and preconceptions, dissolve and disappear.

*From heavenly powers to almighty energy: the redefinition of “spirit”
(shen) in self-cultivation*

As we have seen above, the essential characteristics of self-cultivation might be broadly defined as a series of acts (aligning, regulating, expelling, fixing) concentrated and vigorous enough to overcome the limitations of vital activity, perception and action in order to grasp the spiritual energy of which gods and daemons are made. The term *shen* 神 which refers to an external and heavenly divinity in a religious context, is redefined as the ultimate phase of internal power within a naturalistic frame:

If you think about it but still cannot get it, you may learn of it through spirits and daemons. But this won't be due to a special force in them, it will only be result of the culmination of vital and essential energies.⁸¹

As the ultimate form of intelligence and clairvoyance, *shen* cannot be disassociated from perceptive acuity;⁸² it is the culminating point of vital and essential energies containing the powers and benefits which it accords the sage such as flourishing health, unparalleled sagacity, unlimited control over all that exists, unified perception of the self and the world, and finally a quasi magical protection from all types of curses and catastrophes. There is not one end in self-cultivation but rather a complex set of finalities which allow for different approaches. The ultimate aim of self-cultivation could be understood as spiritual blossoming, political power or bodily health, depending on the perspectives or the values one adopts. But whether it is good health, sagacity or right conduct, the aim is always a transformation or, more specifically, the transformation of vital energy from its basic state into spiritual power. If Confucius was said to keep spirits at bay, and if the chapter “Chu yu B” 楚語下 of the *Discourses of the states* (*Guoyu* 國語) attempted to maintain a strict separation through ritual between humans and spirits, the “Inward training” is probably the first text to voice the possibility for humans to equal the divine efficacy of spirits.⁸³

To see things in their unity and be able to transform them
 We may call that “divine” (*shen*).
 To embrace the whole of human affairs and be able to change accordingly
 We may call it “intelligence.”
 To evolve without altering one's vital force,
 To change without altering one's intelligence,
 Only the sovereign man, who maintains this unity, is capable of this.⁸⁴

⁸¹ “Art of the mind 2,” *GZJS* 13.37.332 and 16.49.405.

⁸² Access to this superior level of the functioning of vital energy is referred to in “Inward training” in terms suggesting the highest forms of power: *shen* (神), the spirit of the deceased, and *ling* (靈), the efficacious action of the spirits who accomplish men's wishes. The arrival of *shen* is often associated, in early texts, with a quasi divine clairvoyance or even the magical protection of a force which inhabits us momentarily, that of the ancestor or the dead parent, the spirit of which is hosted by the body; see, for example, in the *Book of songs*, “Fang luo” 訪落, where the spirit of the dead father visits his son and then protects and enlightens him (Mao 287, *Shisan jing zhushu* 19C.21a).

⁸³ On this point, cf. Michael Puett, *To become a god. Cosmology, sacrifice and self-divinization in early China* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2002), p. 109.

⁸⁴ “Inward training” (*GZJS* 16.49.401).

In opposition to divination, self-cultivation is not a means to fathom the will of ghosts and spirits or to probe what they may know; it is rather a way of elevating oneself to the same level of apprehension, to the same degree of influential action on the world. When one has refined the material principle of one's activity, one may see clearly through the natural processes and enjoy the same acuity as formless and free-floating beings do. This idea first presented in the "Art of the mind" will gain popularity in texts imbued with Daoist thought and will challenge the traditional monopoly of court diviners and shamans over the spiritual world. The "Inward training" contends that man can avail himself of the powers that define spirits while depriving ritual specialists of their prerogatives and getting rid of the superstition they deliberately maintain.⁸⁵

To summarize Michael Puett's analysis, these crucial statements in the "Inward training" undoubtedly contributed to a new definition of human beings and of the nature of spirits, as well as to a new understanding of the relations between the two. It provided the matrix for the ongoing debate in the Warring States and the Han on the possibility of self-divinization and therefore deeply shook the religious and political structure advocated by the Ru tradition. It also challenged the Mohist school, which explicitly denied the possibility of humans gaining power from the divine realm.

⁸⁵ Aside from Michael Puett, this point has been examined by Hu Jiacong in *Guanzi xintan*, p. 102. On the divinization of the ruler and the debate on the possibility of becoming spirit-like through methods of self-cultivation, see *To become a god*, pp. 276–77. As M. Puett explains: "By claiming to be in possession of techniques that allow the practitioner to obtain the power of spirits without resorting to the art of divination patronized at the courts, the authors were making an argument for their own authority: instead of trying to divine the intentions of the spirits and to control them through sacrifices, they claim the ability to divinize themselves." The influence of medical milieus and reflections on human physiology on this aspect of the "Neiyao" is very plausible. Donald Harper discusses the meaning of *shen* in the Mawangdui macrobiotic texts as a principle of inner potency that can be nurtured and developed and ties it to the religious background and its impact on self-cultivation in the "Inward training"; cf. Donald Harper, *The Mawangdui medical manuscripts* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 120–21.

Can you be a spirit, and for how long?

Let us venture a step further in the exploration of the *shen*. The experience of spiritual energy, along with the power or ascendance which it confers (*de* 德), and the experience of the Principle of all things (the Way), are all described along the lines of an event, of something coming from outside:

He whose corporeal form is not regulated,
The Power (*de*) cannot come to him.⁸⁶

This state in which the mind functions optimally and spontaneously manifests itself suddenly and without warning from one's consciousness, not unlike the whimsical spirits summoned, often to no avail, in sacrificial procedures, as echoed in the laments of the "Nine songs" ("Jiuge" 九歌) in the *Chuci* 楚辭 (*Songs of the South*):

Spiritual energy takes place of its own accord.
Now it comes, now it leaves,
It is beyond the reach of our thinking.⁸⁷

The divine efficacy of spirits is present in the mind,
Now arriving, now departing.⁸⁸

The unexpected arrival of the spirit resembles more a sudden intrusion than a calculated effect. The contact with invisible powers, even if they become more or less immanent to the human form, is described in terms which recall the Zhou ancestral cults or the spirit's visitation in the body of a medium who goes into trance. But "Inward training" clearly explains that the spirit is not an external force which possesses the person; spiritual energy results from a progressive refinement of the vital resources of the body from a material point of view and an attitude of inner concentration from a mental perspective. We can detect in the "Art of the mind" a decisive moment of rupture in the process that connects man with the invisible. The ecstatic trance, the loss of consciousness, and the wandering of the soul do not define here the ultimate spiritual experiences. The powers of the sage are defined according to concurrent paradigms, first that of the center, of a clear vision and internal control. It is this trait which distinguishes the form

⁸⁶ "Inward training" GZJS 16.49.402 and "Art of the mind 2," GZJS 13.37.332.

⁸⁷ "Inward training" (GZJS 16.49.402).

⁸⁸ "Inward training" (GZJS 16.49.408).

of self-cultivation promoted by Jixia scholars in the regional culture of Qi from the southern literary culture of Chu adumbrated in the *Songs of the South* and the *Zhuangzi*. The “Art of the mind” stands here in clear-cut contrast with the descriptions of spiritual experience related in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which oftentimes illustrate the final achievement of the human mind in terms of escaping the narrow frontiers of the world, evading the corporeal form, and blithely wandering in nowhere lands. As Anonymous retorts to Heavenly Root, who just enquired of him about the way to govern the empire:

Beat it, you squat man! You bore me with your questions. Don't you know the Creator and I are like buddies? And when I feel weary of it, I will ride the vapors on the wing, pass the rims of this world and wander in the land of non-being before settling in the vast wilds. How dare you bother me with your stupid questions on the empire?⁸⁹

In clear opposition to the prevailing images of the mind as a command center of outer realities, best exemplified in the *Guanzi*, the *Zhuangzi* and certain chapters of the *Huainanzi* tend to favor, in a distinct moral psychology, the imagery of the ecstatic wanderer in a heavenly ascent, deserting the social and political community. This imagery pertains to an individualistic vein of self-cultivation running from the *Zhuangzi* down to the Wei-Jin period, in poets and philosophers like Ji Kang 嵇康 or Ruan Ji 阮籍,⁹⁰ who all assert the detrimental effects of society on personal well-being, and the deadening impact of political reality on their ideals.

Assertive as the effort of the mind to keep control over the body in the “Art of the mind” may seem in comparison, the arrival of the spirit can never occur at will, and is a key marker of the limits of voluntary action. Whereas Western moral philosophy has mainly accounted for recurrent failures in action and irrational behavior by the weakness of the will, many early Chinese texts on self-cultivation, primarily the *Zhuangzi*, stand for a philosophical position that explains our frustrations and failures by an excess of the will. If self-cultivation teaches us how to keep ourselves prepared to receive the Power or the Principle,

⁸⁹ ZZJS 7.293.

⁹⁰ Yu Dunkang, *Wei Jin xuanxue shi* (Beijing, 2002), pp. 299–325. Cf. also Donald Holzman, *Poetry and politics: the life and works of Juan Chi (A.D. 210–263)* (Cambridge, Eng., 1976), Xu Gongchi, *Ruan Ji yu Xi Kang* (Shanghai 1986), and *La vie et la pensée de Hi Kang (223–262 ap. J.-C.)*, (Leiden, 1957). On negative individualism in the *Zhuangzi*, we recommend Xu Keqian, *Zhuangzi zhexue xintan* (Beijing, 2005), pp. 193–207.

we are not capable of provoking this encounter as a causal agent. The “arrival” 來 of the spirit is not an effect one can deliberately bring about, it is essentially a “by-product state” as the philosopher Jon Elster defines it.⁹¹ The direct intention to produce such states invariably precludes the desired outcome from occurring, thereby highlighting the impotence of intentional and voluntary consciousness in the ultimate phase of self-liberation. Many are the highly desirable and divine (*shen*) states of mind in the *Zhuangzi* that should be conceived as such. Notions of non-action and oblivion of oneself partly serve to stress the self-defeating nature of our intention to attain something that cannot be willed.⁹²

Thus, the analogy drawn in the “Inward training” with the arrival of a noble guest illustrates the unpredictable and almost whimsical nature of this force, which does not directly depend on good will, on physical resources, nor on personal schemes or recipes, but nonetheless requires a constant personal discipline to keep the “inner lodging” pure and unencumbered. The “Inward training” emphasizes the limited capacity of humans to enjoy this divine condition. The sage can only enjoy in an intermittent way a divine state that ghosts and daemons enjoy permanently. Spiritual energy emerges from within, but the independence and unpredictability of its manifestation, and the intermittent state of mind it sets into motion suggest that it might be understood as if it were an external force. This is perhaps the most adequate means of communicating the experience as it is undergone in the first person.⁹³

⁹¹ See Elster Jon, *Sour grapes. Studies in the subversion of rationality* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁹² On the limits of autonomy in moral action, see Romain Graziani, “Optimal states and self-defeating plans: the problem of intentionality in early Chinese self-cultivation,” *Philosophy East and West* (Oct. 2009).

⁹³ When in today’s world a painter declares that he was inspired after a long period of apathy, or if he lightheartedly confesses that he was visited by the muses overnight, he does not claim an attachment to the ancient belief in divine beings which entered the body, possessed it and expressed themselves through the artistic medium. And yet, when we replace outdated terms like muse or *daimon* with those of inspiration or grace, we continue to speak of this momentary transformation of perceptive powers, of this experience of intensification of the presence of things, as a state caused by something external, as if it came from the outside, as an event. There are many psychophysical states more common than this sort of pictorial inspiration (but which is, in one sense, the full expression of the Power described in “The Art of the mind,” i.e., the power to gather and coordinate vital breaths, the acuity of the gaze, and the genesis of forms)—many states independent of our consciousness, when one for instance feels in good shape, or even in any given sport, when one suddenly experiences an outstanding concentration and efficiency until the moment when this state of favor is abruptly disrupted. These

Further on in the passage already cited above, the Dao is described not unlike the Holy Spirit, who blows where it will:

It leaves without returning
 It comes without staying.
 How silent! No one hears a sound!
 How sudden, when present in the mind!
 How obscure! No one sees its shape!
 How overwhelming, it surges and rises along with us!
 Its shape cannot be seen
 Its sound cannot be heard
 Though it orders what it accomplishes:
 This is what we call the Way.⁹⁴

To say that the moment when spiritual energy will arrive is unpredictable means that we cannot explain it just by listing its conditions (even if these texts are constantly making recommendations, giving advice and describing preparatory actions). While it depends on the steps leading up to it (getting rid of “objective” knowledge, channeling animal energy, regulating one’s body, managing organs, ensuring the free unhindered circulation of air through the orifices, eliminating emotions, concentrating one’s attention on the power which produces it, returning to the unique source of one’s vital activity), this final phase of the “Art of the mind” is not entirely determined by these preparatory measures. Understanding the ultimate transformation comes down to realizing that it brings about the spontaneous reconfiguration of the entire person in his physical, emotional, intellectual and perceptive dimensions. Even if the “Art of the mind” provides the means to preserve and renew this fortunate state as often as possible, all we know is that it comes and goes, and we will never know when or why it does so at this or that moment in particular. We can only provide a few conditions which should prepare its return, and describe the effects of this power within us.

experiences reveal to us, to a lesser degree, the fluctuating nature of a state which we can feel only provisionally, which we cannot provoke at will, and which can disappear at any moment. The writers of the “Art of the mind” were extremely clear on this unsustainable state of grace and explained on many occasions the necessary and irremediable loss of this favor (*fu* 福).

⁹⁴ “Inward training,” *GZJS* 16.49.398.

The look of wisdom and the aestheticization of the sage

In the “Inward training,” the understanding of natural workings in the sage coincides with a radical reshaping of his whole being. It provokes an utter transformation resembling a rebirth: emotions, thoughts and relationships with the outside world, skin, hair, muscles, organs and orifices are all affected by this transformation. The unwavering unity which characterizes the sage is created by the fundamental unity of his mental activity and his physiological structure. Spiritual exaltation emerges alongside the muscular, nervous and epidermal reconfiguration of the human form, for their common substratum is vital energy carried to its highest degree of concentration. In “Inward training,” these physical transformations are mentioned in the descriptions of the radiant mien of the sage who has enhanced, refined and fully integrated his vital force.⁹⁵ The sage’s appearance is transformed by the workings of virtue, which offer observable physiological changes.

This is a common trait between the *Wuxing*, and the “Art of the mind,” though much more salient in the latter. Mencius, drawing on the *Wuxing*, its concern for moral motivation, its psychologically-oriented vocabulary, and its taxonomy of virtues, also describes in 7A.21 the physical effects of virtue on the ruler: “a lustrous glossiness that may be seen on the face” 粹然見於面 reminiscent of the “jade-like complexion” 玉色 evoked in the *Wuxing*. As Mark Csikszentmihályi observes:

The shared use of the metaphor of jade to describe the appearance of the person who has reached the final stage of ethical cultivation is but one of several core ideas about moral self-cultivation and about the relationship between human beings and the natural world that are shared by the two texts.⁹⁶

It may mean from Mencius’ point of view that virtue is acquired from the inside and impacts the overall substratum of life, the *qi*, as opposed to actions elicited under the pressure of external factors,⁹⁷ in contrast

⁹⁵ Cf. “Inward training”: “When essential energy is conserved... one shines calmly” (GZJS 16.49.403); “When one is capable of remaining regulated and quiescent, one’s flesh is full and round, one’s hearing sharp and vision clear, with firm muscles and robust bones” (GZJS 16.49.404). And, on obtaining the Dao, “This can be seen in someone’s general appearance, in his skin, in his face” (ibid.).

⁹⁶ Csikszentmihályi, *Material Virtue*, p. 102.

⁹⁷ Mencius also explicitly avails himself of the metaphor of the accumulation of *qi* in the context of self-cultivation. Csikszentmihályi (op. cit.) examines Mengzi’s discussion in 2A.2 on *qi* and moral cultivation from three points of view: the immovable mind,

with Mencius' opponent, Gaozi, who defines morality in terms of external rules. Csikszentmihályi shows convincingly that parts of the *Mengzi* were written under the textual influence of the *Wuxing*. Virtue has material and visible signs, and this rhetoric runs through the Han period and can be seen in texts such as the "Far-off journey" ("Yuanyou" 遠遊) of the *Chuci* or in the poem "spirit-woman" (*Shennü* 神女, 1st century BC).⁹⁸

But why did Jixia scholars like the authors of the *Wuxing* and thinkers like Mencius try so hard to associate the sage with a specific external appearance, radiant, sleek, and bright, along the lines of contemporary theories of music and medicine?⁹⁹ Was it to gain the interest of an audience by parading the cosmetic benefits of self-cultivation? This aspect of self-cultivation is one of its distinctive characteristics, for the association of a harmonious physiognomy and a radiant presence in the figure of the man endowed with spiritual potency is quite out of line with previous religious patterns. The shaman was preferably described as a deformed or monstrous being: he is either a midget or a hunchback, as if his physical defectiveness or his infirmity were that which allowed for a "spiritual surplus." Katô Jôken observes that the Duke of Zhou is described as a hunchback midget credited with shamanic powers and tries to show that his father and uncle were also hunchbacks and shamans.¹⁰⁰ The Great Yu, evoked in his shamanic prowess to make the

the nurturing of heavenly *qi*, and the interior location of virtues. Mengzi sojourned twice in Qi, once during the reign of King Wei, and once under King Xuan. It is very unlikely he did not participate in the debates in Jixia. It is Hu Jiacong opinion's, which we follow, that he took a lot and brought little to the Jixia scholars, and integrated the thought developed in the "Inward training" in his own philosophy. Guo Moruo was the first to analyze the influence of the "Art of the mind" on Mencius' thought (*Jixia Huang-Lao xuepai de pipan*, in *Shi pipan shu*, Beijing, repr. 1996). Hu Jiacong in *Guanzi xintan* compares political theories in the *Guanzi* and the *Mencius* (pp. 474 ff.) and lists all the similar passages in the "Xinshu" chapters and the *Mengzi*'s "Gaozi shang" "Jinxin shang" and "Jinxin xia" (p. 334).

⁹⁸ Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue*, pp. 134–35.

⁹⁹ Contrast this with Socrates's ugly physical appearance, which is the sanctuary of a beautiful, invisible soul, maliciously discussed by Montaigne in *Essais* III.12 "De la physionomie." Such a clear-cut contrast between the look of the body and the nature of the soul cannot be conceived in the self-cultivation texts we examine—aside from *Zhuangzi*—for ideological reasons and also as a consequence of the continuity between the material body and the inner spirit.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Katô Jôken, *Chûgoku kodai bunka no kenkyû* (Tôkyô, 1980), pp. 366–67, quoted by Julia Ching. As Julia Ching writes in *Mysticism and kingship. The heart of Chinese wisdom* (Cambridge, UK, 1997): "If a certain deformity was considered to be the sign of a possible religious talent, other disabilities have been regarded widely as the sign of possible compensatory gifts. The mythical K'uei, patron of musicians, is described as

rain come by the sole virtue of his dancing pace, ended up lame and stricken with hemiplegia. Such physical anomaly, deformity, paralysis or blindness may be understood as the negative sign of a privileged and compensatory relationship with the divine. The body of the man gaining divine power must be deformed or destroyed, or the body of the woman for that matter, as we are reminded by two intriguing characters in a later source, the *Lienü zhuan* 烈女傳, Zhongli Chun 鍾離春, spouse of the duke Xuan 宣公 of Qi 齊, and the Orphan Girl 孤逐女, both described as physically ugly women endowed with supernatural powers and a superior political intelligence.¹⁰¹

Between this trait of archaic culture and the aesthetics of the body in self-cultivation, the moral reflection developed in Confucian milieus contributed to the secularization of the notion of *de* 德 as spiritual potency, within the reach of anyone engaged on the path of moral reformation. Starting with mythical, half fabulous half monstrous features, the image of the body undergoes a process of socialization when the self/body (*shen*) becomes the locus of voluntary practices. It is from this moment that we begin to encounter contending paradigms promoting the harmonious and graceful shape of the sage, in the *Five kinds of action*, the “Art of the mind,” or later in the *Mencius*. A beautiful appearance becomes the natural expression of the moral reformation of the self. The ostensible signs of spiritual acumen are not to be found any longer in frightening or defective shapes but in radiant and robust corporeal forms. Infirm figures are “rewritten” to become compatible with these aesthetic standards promoted by various forms of self-cultivation. Physical deformity becomes suspect, and is associated with the outcast and shameful condition of amputated men punished by the almighty law. Typical of this evolution is the fictitious discussion recorded in the *Han Feizi* and in the *Annals of Sire Lü* in which Confucius denies the understanding of the expression *yi zu*

a one-legged monster who taught men how to play on stones to call down the ghosts and spirits. The ritual and historical texts also speak of the blind musicians who played an important part at sacrificial rituals, presumably including rain-dances.” Ching also reminds us (p. 54) that blind musicians at the Zhou court were in charge of predicting the weather. They were seen as capable of sensing and hearing better than anyone else the resonances and currents that blow and flow through the air.

¹⁰¹ Huang Fumi, *Lienü zhuan*, ch. 6 “Biantong zhuan” (Shanghai 1989), pp. 107 and 113.

一足 applied to music master Kui 夔 as meaning “one-footed.”¹⁰² We know that if Kui appears most frequently as the music master of the wise emperors of the past Shun 舜 and sometimes Yao 堯, he is also evoked in other textual sources as a strange one-footed creature. The moral imperative of holding fast to the integrity of the body sanctified by the Confucians was exploited by the Legalists, whose systematized policy of penal mutilation strengthened the ties between outlaws and cripples: every immoral person must become deformed and incomplete. By the complementarity of moral self-cultivation and penal policy, the former producing complete and radiant bodies, the latter mutilated and crippled ones, both Confucianism and Legalism play on the same keyboard of aesthetic values albeit in a different mode. If we consider what is prescribed in Confucian self-cultivation and what is proscribed in the Legalist technique of government, we find a coincidence of the political values ascribed to the corporeal form.

There is a possible common sense explanation of the association of a beautiful appearance with the cultivation of virtue: physical changes in the body are a simple outcome of the preservation and refinement of the *qi*, the very stuff we are made of, “body and soul.” Since *qi* accounts for the physical body and its animation, material and mental changes occur together. There is hence a justified continuity between therapeutic practices and moral cultivation; the moral and humoral aspects of the self are intimately linked together. Conversely, the lack of moral integrity may provoke the intrusion of a pernicious *qi* that brings about a bad complexion, a disruption in the natural workings of the body, sometimes even death. Such is the view held in many chapters of the *Guanzi* like the “Inward training” or the “Xingshi jie” 形勢解. But we have the hint that the decisive explanation of this association between a moral mind and a beautiful appearance in self-cultivation may rather be situated on the ideological plane. Csikszentmihályi suggests that in the *Mengzi*, the physical appearance of the sage, his jade coloration, and his bright

¹⁰² “Duke Ai inquired of Confucius: ‘I heard that Kui was one-footed, is it true?’ Confucius replied: ‘Kui was a human, how could he be one-footed? He was indeed a most penetrating musician, but certainly not of a different species. What Yao said was this: ‘Having one person like Kui is fully enough,’ and he appointed him as music master. Whence, noblemen rephrased his words like this: ‘One like Kui is enough,’ and they did not mean ‘being one-footed’” (Chen Qiyu, ed., *Han Feizi xin jiaozhu*, [Shanghai, 2000], 33.731). This anecdote, with a few variations also figures in the *Annals of Sire Lü* (LSCQ 22/6). For a study of Kui, see Marcel Granet, *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne* (Paris, 1994 repr.), pp. 505–15.

eyes transparently express the authenticity of moral motivation and thus silence possible accusations of bigotry leveled at the Ru. The body of the sage shows everyone that his virtue cannot possibly be faked.¹⁰³ As to the rhetorical tie between outward beauty and inner moral integrity in the “Art of the mind,” it seems primarily of medical and physiological inspiration, in which *qi* is the decisive factor of health and moral force. But it may also be a way of publicizing the benefits of the art of the mind at Jixia in a context of rivalry in recommending itself to the ruler as the most desirable method of government reconciling personal well being and common concern.

Self-cultivation and the praise of deformity

The rhetorical conflation of moral excellence and a physical appearance graced with luster and sleekness¹⁰⁴ seems to have irked the authors of the *Zhuangzi* more than anyone else. The *Zhuangzi* not only derides the vanity of technical exercises performed by self-cultivation adepts and the assertive search of immortality that were to become the core of Daoist practices.¹⁰⁵ It also distills its black irony against Confucian self-cultivation, which assumes a necessary tie between moral integrity and physical completeness, and conceives of physical appearance as the radiant expression of inner flourishing, the natural outcome of refined vital breath and essence.

¹⁰³ Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ The justification of this association is discussed and justified in detail in the dialogue Xun Kuang invents between Confucius and his disciple Zigong (cf. Csikszentmihályi, *Material virtue*, pp. 128–29). Variants of this didactic gloss on the correct meaning of the association of jade with the *junzi* in the *Songs* appear in the *Liji*, in the *Guanzi*, in Liu Xiang’s 劉向 *Shuoyuan* 說苑 and Wang Su’s 王肅 *Kongzi jiyu* 孔子家語.

¹⁰⁵ See for instance *Zhuangzi*’s chapter 15 “Keyi” 刻意, “Torturing one’s mind,” which examines the erroneous practices of self-cultivation, among which figure classical forms of eremitism, breathing and gymnastic exercises. Even if this chapter was in all likelihood written during the Han (see Zhang Hengshou’s discussion on this point in *Zhuangzi xintan* [Hubei, 1983], pp. 174–77), it is in the direct line of *Zhuangzi*’s criticism of a set of impersonal, assertive and self-defeating external rules for the conduct of life at the expense of a singular and ever-reinvented way of life. Zhang Hengshou, however, thinks that the rather linear doctrinal style of the chapter and the suggestions of other forms of self-cultivation, together with the images of the intact swords, are nonetheless in blatant contradiction with the oblivion of the self and the colorful fictions of the Inner Chapters.

Zhuangzi's repeated attacks on the aesthetic tenet of many forms of self-cultivation can be traced at least in three directions: 1) the facetious celebration of divine hideousness; 2) the moral rehabilitation of incomplete bodies (among which amputated outlaws);¹⁰⁶ and 3) the lethargic or cadaverous mien of sages who merge with the structuring forces of the universe in their trances.

1. The crippled, deformed, or ugly characters portrayed in the text, particularly in chapter five "Signs of virtue complete" ("Dechong fu" 德充符), embody a ferocious response to the aestheticization of the virtuous man and the ruthless domination he exerts on the weak.¹⁰⁷ Some of them fit quite adequately the descriptions of the fabulous and deficient beings from the archaic period mentioned above (cripples and hunchbacks), and express more particularly a critical reaction against the socialized forms of spiritual potency.¹⁰⁸ The aforementioned chapter portrays among others a character of uncommon ugliness, Ai Taituo 哀駘它, maliciously qualified as *e* 惡, "ugly, unhealthy, sick, abhorrent," who nonetheless attracts, fascinates, and seduces anyone who gets acquainted with him. From his person emanates a charismatic aura which makes women fall madly in love with him, to such an extent that they beg their husbands' permission to leave, for they had rather be one among the many concubines of such a man than the official spouse of another. Zhuangzi's position is situated at the antipodes of

¹⁰⁶ We find indeed many colorful one-footed characters in the *Zhuangzi*, whose discussions with historical figures like Confucius or chief minister of Zheng, Zichan 子產, often leave the impression that it is these paragons of virtue and prestigious grantees that are in fact monstrous. Such episodes, far from being gimmicks, play a crucial role in the expression of Zhuangzi's political ideas. Among them we find: Youshi 右師 (3.125), Master on the right side; Wang Tai 王駘 (5.187), toward whom disciples flock; Shen tujia 申徒嘉 (5.196), Gracious Stretching Foot, classmate of Zichan; Shushan wuzhi 叔山無趾 (5.202) who, after being scolded by Confucius, makes him realize his pettiness.

¹⁰⁷ On the political significance of the deformed bodies and amputated outlaws in the *Zhuangzi*, see Albert Galvany, "Pensar desde la exclusion: monstruos y seres extraordinarios en le Zhuangzi" PhD dissertation (University of Granada, 2007). Galvany offers valuable and remarkably documented analysis on many stories in the *Zhuangzi* which cast characters with hideous or crippled bodies and shows how they challenge the ethics and aesthetics of corporeal form in the Ritualist and Legalist schools.

¹⁰⁸ The Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* introduce many a deformed character: Zhili shu 支離叔 or Uncle Departed-Limb (4.180), a sort of dismembered hunchback who on the grounds of his physical condition is lucky enough to be dispensed from state mandatory labor and stipended by the state; the hunchback Yinqi zhili wushen 闕跂支離無脤, Crooked-Foot Departed-Limb No-Lips (5.216), who is also the favorite advisor of Prince Ling of Wei; Weng'ang daying 甕大盎 癭 (5.216), Jar-Shaped Goiterous-Neck, favorite advisor of Prince Huan of Qi; Master Yu 子輿 (6.258), whose body becomes twisted and who ends up monstrous but satisfied with his fate.

the representation of virtue and personal ascendancy by a harmonious physical shape, a representation that seems to have become one of the key markers of self-cultivation. Zhuangzi does not recoil from the subtlety of postulating the radical and almost necessary split between external form and inner qualities of grace and power.

2. Vehemently flouting the basic tenet of Confucianism according to which the body is the ethical expression of the moral self and which consequently makes of physical integrity the sign of a pious and virtuous life, the *Zhuangzi* depicts compliance to the rites and laws as a means to cripple one's inborn nature.¹⁰⁹ What is conceived as the supreme way of shaping the self—ritual manners, graceful recitation, and earnest study of texts—is precisely what one needs to forget in order to make room for Heaven within the self, that is, to revert to a spontaneous and selfless regime of vital activity. The *Zhuangzi* lampoons the “punitive orthopedics” practiced since the Shang and radicalized by Legalist statesmen¹¹⁰ in a society where an amputated person is necessarily an evil one. The sage's serene indifference to outward contingencies is praised as the privilege of amputated men. Amputation is a stroke of luck that frees one from ordinary worries and fears, and from a narrow-minded individual perspective on life:

The man who has had his feet cut off in punishment discards his fancy clothes because praise and blame no longer touch him. The chained convict climbs the highest peak without fear because he has abandoned all thought of life and death. These two are submissive and unashamed because they have forgotten other men, and by forgetting other men they have become men of Heaven.¹¹¹

3. Thirdly, the apex of vital resources is repeatedly evoked in the *Zhuangzi* as provoking a momentary extinction of the physical body. Sages who enter a trance-like state and voyage beyond the world of visible forms have a frightening look of doltishness. They appear as dead or plunged in a state of idiocy.¹¹² In chapter 21, Laozi is described

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Zhuangzi*'s chapter six “Dazong shi.” On deformity and disease in the *Zhuangzi*, see Romain Graziani, *Fictions philosophiques du Tchouang-tseu* (Paris, 2006), ch. 3.

¹¹⁰ Chen Anli, “Kaogu ziliao suo fanying de Shang Zhou yuexing,” in *Zhou wenhua lunji* (Xi'an, 1993), pp. 155–60.

¹¹¹ ZZJS 23.815; trans. Burton Watson, *The complete works of Chuang Tzu* (New York, 1968), p. 260.

¹¹² Cf. also the beautiful and ironically self-deprecating lament in *Daode jing* 20: “Indeed I have an idiotic mind, so bare and blank! People are clear and clever, I alone appear confused! People are perceptive and penetrating, I alone am dull and dumb!”

by a baffled Confucius as a desiccated tree.¹¹³ “He who can grasp that which unites all things and identify with it considers his limbs and his skeleton as dust and dirt,” asserts the Old Master to Confucius. Nanguo Ziqi 南國子綦, in the famous overture of chapter 2, “All things on a par,” renders his mind like cold ashes and his body like dead wood. These passages with an obviously parodist intention play at cross-purposes with the descriptions of the material effects the cultivation of virtue in Ru circles or in the school of the art of the mind at Jixia are supposed to bring about: dynamic outlook, erect and upright (*zheng* 正) body, charismatic presence, sharp vision. The semantic code of self-cultivation is overturned so that spiritual penetration appears as totally estranged from social practices and cannot be placed in continuity with political authority any longer. The particular human type of the *junzi* 君子, the gentleman, the male member of nobility who cherishes his corporal integrity, who cultivates rituals and flourishes in the adequate performance of his social role, is in no way superior to other human types in the variegated profusion of beings; no one can act as the moral template, the universal norm, or the paragon of humanity, and thereby censure other beings. Zhuangzi’s vision of self-independence is induced by the painful awareness of the irretrievable breach between social values and vital élan, between individual liberation and the necessity to conform to one’s role in society.

The irony of the *Zhuangzi*’s lampoons against the pretense of imposing a universal moral and aesthetic norm on human beings, along with an ideologically corresponding form of self-cultivation, can still be savored today as a superb exercise of self-liberation against a refined form of political tyranny of the body. This critique was all the more to the point when we know that over the course of the 3rd century BC, the self-cultivation school of Jixia increasingly became a political instrument and an ideological discourse focused on the sovereign.

Conclusion

Meditative practices can essentially follow two directions, though in most self-cultivation texts these tendencies may influence each other and freely coexist: in the first, one tends to an acute form of attention

¹¹³ ZZJS 21.243.

to self—words and acts, intentions and demeanor—and thereby works in continuity with one’s social persona. The individual examines himself and concentrates on his inner dispositions. In this general form of self-cultivation specified among others by the Ru, textual knowledge and ritual practices play a full part in the process of education, and we do not face a breach between “outer” learning and inner clear-sightedness. Self-cultivation is the art of harmonizing norms and forms and therefore puts a strong emphasis on the completeness of the body. The individual character, the singular personality, far from being valued, yield under the imperative of playing one’s assigned role in society and adapting to changing circumstances. In the Ru tradition, with Confucius, Mencius or Xun Kuang, the perfected man is referred to as the *junzi*, the gentleman, committed to the social and political community, actively playing a role in the moral reform of the ruler and his people. Self-cultivation and work on the mind are narrowly tied to ritual observance (sacrifice, ceremonies, fasting). In the *Wuxing* for instance, the accent prevails on the social and ritual awareness of the educated person who aspires to encounter a sage.

The other orientation aspires to a more radical purification of the self, in which every vestige of individuality defined by tastes, habits and goals, every aspect of social persona and ordinary self-conscience are ideally discarded and forgotten. When freed from these elements, one is face to face with pure vital activity and, subjectively, in a state of emptiness. “Though one’s old self has disappeared, there still exists something in me that does not disappear.”¹¹⁴ The paradigmatic and foundational experience of wisdom is the dissolution of the self in the spontaneous workings of Nature. It aims at a modified regime of mental activity, a divine state of unknowingness sometimes described as the experience of the sudden intensification of the feeling that one is carried along by the flowing activity of the universal process. In order to attain this blissful state, the mind first regulates its inner dynamic motions and, when it attains a state of deep calm, discovers it is ethically distinct and independent from those outer realities ordinarily clung to in desires and emotions. External practices and knowledge (ritual, divination, study of texts) are discarded in favor of a personal intuition of the workings of the Way within the self, leading to an unprecedented state of vitality and inspiration which can be conceived of as the secularization

¹¹⁴ ZZJS 21.709.

of the experience of the spirit in a religious context. In the *Zhuangzi* a strong emphasis is placed on an absolute state of oblivion, conceived not as a defect of memory, but as an active resource. Meditants in many stories lose their selves, dispense with their individual lives, “treat life as something external” 外生 and wander in the chaotic wastes of space. In this form of extraversion, the ultimate experience of the sage is not the divine capacity to seize and rule the world but the joy of dilating oneself while freely roaming across the “vasty fields” of imagination. The self experiences its unimportance as a tiny point in space and time, and coincidentally the ability to enjoy momentarily a state of non-separation with the world in its dynamic dimension (as opposed to its visible and concrete aspects defined by “forms,” *xing* 形).

As another contrast with the first major orientation of self-cultivation, in the *Zhuangzi* or certain parts of the *Huainanzi* that unambiguously plagiarize it, the sage is not called the gentleman but is felicitously termed the “ultimate man” (*zhiren* 至人), or the “authentic man” (*zhenren* 真人), or even more audaciously the “irregular man” (*jiren* 畸人), in open conflict with the social models of wisdom and virtue elaborated in the Ru schools. It is in the *Zhuangzi* that we find for the first time the dithyrambic praise of an individualistic, eremitic way of life, shunning the turmoil of the human world. Cultivation of the self and individual flourishing are almost incompatible with the exercise of power, as is repeatedly illustrated in the chapter “Kings who abdicate” (“Rang wang” 讓王). The secession from political commitment is also ironically emblemized in the dream-like figures of the spirit-men (*shenren* 神人) as ideal models and companions for the immortality-seekers following stern dietary strictures (virtual abstention from solid food), applying breathing techniques (expulsion of pernicious breaths, circulation of breath and blood), and ingesting vegetal and mineral drugs in order to attain a similar self-divinized condition. It is only at the very end of the Warring States that the quest for immortality appears in the northeastern state of Qi and the southern state of Chu, and partially supersedes the search for an unharmed and secure long life which was one of the most distinctive features of self-cultivation.

Far from searching for immortality or adumbrating methods of self-divinization, an important part of the *Zhuangzi* linked to self-cultivation is dedicated to the half playful, half wavering acceptance of death envisioned as a personal event superceding the social perspective adopted in the ongoing debate on funerary rites. Zhuangzi invents fictions served by a powerful rhetoric and a scathing critical sense in

order to strike our minds and prepare us to experience indifferently all the phases of human life. Since the whole of the *Zhuangzi* teems with stories of death, disease, or deformity, many a time seen from a subjective perspective (Master Yu facetiously commenting on his becoming a grotesque monster, Master Si interviewed on his deathbed, Zhuang Zhou scolding his disciples while dying, Shen Tujia retorting to the brash Zichan about how he managed to overcome the grief and humiliation of losing one foot), we may wonder if they should not be reckoned as meditative exercises preparing the reader for any kind of event that may affect him, very much like the *praemeditatio* of the Stoics, as if Zhuangzi had decided to ponder at length the matters and events that make humans unhappy—amputation, poverty, hunger, ugliness, suffering and death—in order to persuade us these are not evils since they do lie within our power but are the expression of fate, *ming* 命.¹¹⁵

This way of provoking drastic changes in moral sensibility by resorting to the striking power of images (as a contrast with most self-cultivation texts, which use a more pedestrian style and imagination) is one of the most refined expressions of self-cultivation practices in early China and one of the more distinctive achievements of its philosophical literature. But the *Zhuangzi* is an exception in many regards, and the way self-cultivation is viewed or reinvented in its chapters would need a separate study (there is, for instance, the rehabilitation of menial tasks and the valorization of playful activities such as the divine butchering of an ox by the virtuoso cook Ding, the prodigious mental askesis performed by a hunchback from Chu in catching cicadas on a stick or the mystical design of a bell-rack by carpenter Qing). In a more common vein running through pre-imperial self-cultivation texts, the way the self reflects upon itself, the anonymous formulation of discourse and the paradigmatic mode of existence represented by the sage all bear the strong mark of impersonality. The comprehension of the person from the outset as a configuration of energy and as an expression of cosmic sovereignty in its final stage of spiritual ascension destroys any particular character it might have. Personal experience has no weight because self-cultivation is not founded on personality but rather results from an impersonal state of existence, through meditation (as the psychological experience of the state of emptiness) or kingship (as a political role requiring cutting

¹¹⁵ On the notion of *ming* 命 in the *Zhuangzi*, see Xu Keqian, *Zhuangzi zhaxue xintan* (Beijing, 2005), ch. 7, pp. 173–92.

bonds with human sensibility, as described at length in the *Han Feizi*. In these two cases the individual attempts to incorporate the Way by eliminating distinctive forms and features. Man is never perceived in an historical or biographical mode. The perspective is rather *biological* in the broadest sense. The realm of a personal life experience (*hic*) dissolves in the mind's meditation; the particular relationship which the individual might have with himself is thus insignificant. The problem of the mind is in no way personal: the mind's reflection does not *constitute* a self just as the individual does not consider his own personal life, but rather life in general as a dynamic process. Self-cultivation shifts from the energetic and organic apprehension of the individual to the political and social realm, leaving out of consideration the singularity of the mind and its sphere of personal experience. The concentration of the self never amounts to a consciousness of one's own individuality, as it is shaped by personal history, core beliefs and values, but rather a consideration of that which, by contributing to his individualization, harms the vital principle within him.¹¹⁶ It is less the *interior* world than the *internal* functions which are explored in self-cultivation. It is concerned with the task of perfecting oneself, but it avoids any interest in the individual, his sentiments, the state of his soul, his particular mental states—in short anything which might contribute to the visible identification of an individuality.

Human nature appears as the sum of vital functions which, fully appropriated and fully developed through progressive refinement, can transform any person into a sage. Self-cultivation does not lead to self-knowledge, but rather to a capacity to act on the source of one's vital energy and to learn how, through it, to transform oneself. This approach has remained at the heart of Chinese thought up to the 20th century and continues to be one of its most distinctive traits. The sage's emptiness¹¹⁷ reveals to what extent he is an impersonal figure without subjectivity. In "The Art of the mind" the sage cannot be defined by

¹¹⁶ See "Valuing the self" (Zhongji 重己) in the *Annals of Sire Lü* (LSCQ I/3). It is worth noting that in spite of its title, this chapter only speaks of the care of our nature (*xing*), and chastizes those who do not understand its fundamental characteristics (*xingming zhi qing* 性命之情). The sphere of the individual which might be suggested by the mention of the self is dissolved in considerations of what might do harm to or benefit life.

¹¹⁷ "Art of the mind 1": "Empty, he is the beginning of all beings. This is why it is said that he can be considered the origin of the world" (GZJS 13.36.330).

individual traits or individual acts.¹¹⁸ He has no personality and the expression used in reference to him, *shengren* 聖人, is less the generic indication of an outstanding person than the rhetorical condensation of a series of actions whose connections and coherence prevail over the agent executing them.¹¹⁹ The sage is above all a sphere of operations, all necessary, spontaneous and supremely efficient, identified with the way Nature works, beyond any particular determination.¹²⁰ His being is an extension of his doing. His behavior flows directly from his *morphê*: with his nine bodily apertures unencumbered, he circulates freely throughout the world; with his energies regulated and coordinated, he moves easily among men. His firm muscles and robust bones assure him a liberal and influential conduct, just as his concise but striking words bring about the submission of all under Heaven. The sage experiences an untrammelled unity between his organism and the world he organizes.

The conception of man developed in the “Art of the mind” finds its ultimate ideological expression in the topic of power and political authority which haunts early Chinese debates. Conceived after the model of the Way, the sage impersonates the sublimated conception of the sovereign. In return, the expression of the Way tends to become the idealized hypostasis of sovereignty. We would be wrong to see in the move toward internal pacification a quietist philosophy solely occupied with the search for internal calm and a return to emptiness. If the sage empties his mind of all the inclinations likely to influence him, it is in order to prepare himself for the reception of the spiritual energy which bestows power, mastery and knowledge. This power of the mind never serves as a means to know things in themselves, or to contemplate a

¹¹⁸ In contrast for example with the Three Emperors (*sanhuang*) and the Five Lords (*wudi*), who are characterized by their own virtues or their singular inventions; on this subject, see Marcel Granet, *La civilisation chinoise* (Paris, repr. 1968), chapters 1 and 2.

¹¹⁹ Once again, the *Zhuangzi* is exceptional in this matter. Zhuang Zhou and those who continued his writings generally think in terms of living figures and do not conceive of wisdom or philosophy without casting a specific character for each particular episode. The sage, in his various guises and multiple manifestations, is always present in the *Zhuangzi*. We are constantly confronted with him as he acts, speaks, or even blunders before us; these concrete images speak to us as equal human beings, and not as philosophers in search of wisdom or contenders for power.

¹²⁰ See for example “Art of the mind 1,” in which the description of the Way also signifies the sage’s path through the world: “The Way of Heaven is empty and formless; being empty, it bends before nothing; being formless, it struggles with nothing. Struggling with nothing, it circulates freely through all beings without altering itself. Power is what the Way grants. Those who obtain it may grow and generate” (*GZJS* 13.36.328).

supreme transcendent being; it is a means to rule, subjugate and grasp the world. The sociological conditions surrounding the practice of speculative thought in ancient China, the prevalence of public forms of writing situated at the crossroads between religious practices and political authority, the fact that most literati rose from social classes which were below that of the high nobility and aspired to the position of minister or high-ranking civil servant (when they were not already part of the sovereign's intimate circle) might each in their own way account for the omnipresence of the theme of kingship among the learned. The increasing importance of patronage and sponsorship during the second half of the Warring States, as well as the emergence of textual traditions centered on politics, reinforced the ties between the state and the schools of thought. The king remained the privileged figure of the accomplished man in the Daoist tradition of self-cultivation. This tradition, combining with the Confucian moral reminiscence of the wise sovereigns' heyday, contributed mightily to the Legalist rethinking of the acquisition and preservation of absolute power concentrated solely in the hands of the king.

Between the noble nostalgia of a golden age where virtuous emperors governed by civilizing their peoples and the messianic dream of restoring unity "under heaven" through the quasi divine powers of the One Man, these philosophical currents redirected the demands of individual self-perfection toward a form of sovereignty and a focus on royal omnipotence. It is in this way that the reflections on self-cultivation never gained their independence, as if the literati of the ancient world had given precedence to the king over the self, and valued subjection over subjectivity.