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Transcendence in Xi Kang's Poetry

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Abstract
This paper examines Xi Kang's poetry, notably his works on "roaming intro transcendence" (*Youxian shi* 遊仙詩), revealing their religious dimensions as also entangled worldly aspect. I argue that any content referring to transcendence or immortality should be understood in an actively religious context, and that Xi Kang's religious activities and creations also serve temporal functions. This mixed feature opens a path toward an empathetic understanding of early medieval literati like Xi Kang and may even establish an enduring pattern among premodern intellectuals.

As one of the members of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢), Xi Kang 嵇康 (223-263) was known as their "second greatest writer", while Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263) was called the greatest one (Owen and Sun 2010, 180). He was also famous as a representative of the literary and intellectual circles of the Wei dynasty (220-266), where he exerted a wide social influence.[1] In terms of his literary creations, he wrote a number of tetrasyllabic verses (*siyan shi* 四言詩) and pentasyllabic poems (*wuyan shi* 五言詩). About a quarter of these focus on roaming into transcendence or becoming immortal, [2] which makes Xi Kang an eminent writer in this poetry theme.[3] In addition, Xi Kang also

[1] His social influence was probably the cause of his execution. When he openly showed his opposition toward the ethics that ruling Sima clan proposed, they condemned him to death.

[2] Zhang Hong calculated that Xi Kang wrote seven of each, making up not quite a quarter of his extant sixty-two poems. See Zhang 2009, 284. Stephen Owen points out that transcendence is a dominant theme in his poetic writing (Owen and Swarts 2017, 258-59).

[3] *Youxian* 遊仙 was a popular theme during the Six Dynasties and occupied a separate category in Xiao Tong's 蕭統 *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature). It is also mentioned in other major Six Dynasties' works, such as *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (Carved Dragons of the Literary Mind) by Liu Xie 劉勰 (465-522), as well as *Shipin* 詩品 (Grades of Poetry) by Zhong Rong 鐘嶸 (468-518).

played a role in current intellectual trends, notably the Pure Talk (*qingtan* 清談) fashion of aristocratic conversation and the philosophical tradition of Mystery Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學; see Chai 2020). More specifically, he was known for his persuasive and sophisticated debating skills as well as for a number of relevant essays, such as his *Yangsheng lun* 養生論 (On Nourishing Life; see Henricks 1983).

As regards his poems on roaming into transcendence, previous studies often come from a literary perspective. This means they connect to research paradigms in literature and see Xi Kang' s work from a secularized narrative,[4] not making the religious aspect a central focus. This has impacted their understanding within the field of religious studies as well. Even literati at the time held a great interest in religion, this factor has not attracted much attention among scholars.

However, in fact, when the poems were written, the subject categorization into literary or religious was nonexistent. Rather, poets and thinkers held an enduring interest in the transcendent world which naturally co-existed with their involvement in the worldly affairs of officialdom. Considering this, this study intends to provide a more holistic view that repudiates the distinction that excludes the religious from the liter-

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Youxian not only appears in the works of latter notable writers, e.g., Guo Pu 郭璞 (276-324), it can also be traced back to as early as the *Yuanyou* 遠遊 (Far-off Journey) in the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of the South), then manifest in the y*uefu* 樂府 (rhapsodies) of the Han.

[4] A "secularized narrative" tries to exclude the world of divine beings and spirits, which was naturally co-existed with human in a "premodern" world, an enchantment time, see (Taylor 2007). Matching this mode of inquiry, Lu Xun (1927), an early modern scholar taking a deep interest in Xi Kang and editor of his works, picked "taking drugs" as a main characteristic to understand Xi Kang's thought and actions, but he ignored it as a religious way to be a transcendent, seeing it just as a symbol of being "with belief." Zhang Hong (2009) and Sun Changwu (2005) noticed the importance of the *Yangsheng lun* to investigate Xi Kang's *Youxian shi*, but do not further discuss the religious aspects of Xi Kang's philosophy and poetry. Literary analysis is also Owen's emphasis (2006), although he specifies that Daoism was "a useful approach" for poems of this period and points out Xi Kang's "obsession" with roaming into transcendence.

ary or philosophical[5] and instead tries to understand Xi Kang's *youxian shi* more comprehensively. It also opens an empathetic glimpse on the enduring life pattern, in which there is always entanglement between the secular element and "probably sincere" religious activity.[6]

Throughout this article, I continue to use terms of modern discourse, such as philosophy/ philosophical, religion/religious, literature/literary, yet work to present the naturally holistic status of these elements or aspects in Xi Kang's work. Under this holistic view which transcends secularized disciplinary interest, Xi Kang emerges as a good example showcasing how this approach is practiced. In turn, this presentation is based on his writing's own character: his heterogeneous set of resources and kinds of bricolage, independent of whether it is seen primarily as religious—often neglected or under-valued—or as literary and thus purely secular, or again as the poetic use of philosophy, which tends to be rationalized and without relation to the religious.

Meanwhile, this holistic understanding also changes the way we portray Xi Kang as an educated literatus born in a family of officials. It showcases the complex picture how people in early medieval China lived: to them there was no separation of what we today call secular and divine, nor yet the modern impression that being keen on gods, ghosts, and spirits is merely a form of superstition and belongs to the life of those less educated.[7] Rather, well-educated aristocrats like Xi Kang al-

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[5] About how to transcend modern disciplinary cleavages and why the holistic approach applied to traditional China society, see (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 4-13). Kohn outlined a "Lao-Zhuang "tradition which related to both "philosophical Daoism" and "religious Daoism" but neither of them, showed a combination trial (1992, 1-10, 81-95). Wen, Meulenbeld, Schipper, and Goossaert all expounded how "philosophical Daoism" and "religious Daoism" were distinct and finally invented an "acceptable and disdained" Daoism: the "fundamentalist Confucians", the Christian norm and the secular attack on Chinese religions (Wen 2006, 120-127; Meulenbeld 2010, 1-4; Schipper 2014, 6-7; Goossaert 2011, 4-13).

[6] The expression "probably sincere" refers to Stephen Owen's statement that "scholars often try to decide whether the person in question did or did not believe in immortals" (2006, 139). In Xi Kang's case, I think, it is not all that controversial.

[7] About how this "superstition" discourse was invented, see (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 4-11, 43-65).

ways had close contact with religious adepts, whether Daoist, Buddhist, or popular. They also mastered a variety of longevity, spiritual, and religious systems and techniques. As Zornica Kirkova puts it: "Certain esoteric knowledge had become a part of a broader cultural repertoire shared by the elite" (2021).

The key theme that bridges the gap in this context is known as *youxian*, a compound that can be read variously: as verb-object, which renders it "roaming as transcendents" or "roaming with the immortals" (Yip 1997, 143; Kirkova 2016, 22); or as adjective-noun, which leads to renditions of "roaming immortals" (Miao 1975, 48; Holzman 1988; Owen 2006) or "wandering immortals" (Frodsham and Cheng Xi 1967, 92; Kirkova 2016, 22). However, if we understand the word *xian* in a broader sense and do not limit it to the persons of immortals, the phrase comes to indicate the state of transcendence or immortality, where the protagonist can roam freely. Matching this reading Edward Schafer renders *youxian* "saunters in sylphdom" (1981), while Paul Kroll calls it "roaming into transcendence" (1996), a rendition I chose to adopt.

Nourishing Life

To understand the context and import of the poems properly, it is important to appreciate the religious dimension of Xi Kang's ideas about preserving life and his sincere interest in seeking transcendence. In his *Yangsheng lun*, he emphasizes that long life and immortality can be achieved in this world and outlines various approaches to this end. He also formulates the overarching worldview in terms of vital energy (*qi* 氣) and focuses on the practice of breathing exercises.

Xi Kang articulates that although he himself was not able to actually realize transcendence, it was possible to prolong human life through nourishing health (Dai 2014, 253; Henricks 1983, 22; Sun 2005, 177). To him, transcendents are beings who have received a special kind of *qi*, which means the state is not accessible to anyone and cannot be achieved through artificial labors, such as accumulation of practices and studies. However, prolonging life from a hundred to a thousand years is workable through proper approaches such as keeping mental equanimity and emotional stability (Dai 2014, 253).

After establishing that it is indeed possible to attain long life, Xi Kang outlines three major approaches or techniques. The first and main approach is to remain dispassionate and peaceful within to nourish the spirit; the second is to avoid wealth and official rank to preserve oneself from danger and harm; and the third involves dietary methods, including the abstinence from meat, grains, and wine. The latter goes back to medical information as documented in the *Shennong bencao jing* 神農本草經 (The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica), as Xi Kang quoted. In addition, Xi Kang also recommends taking certain drugs to prolong life.

First, being dispassionate and peaceful to nourish the spirit relates to views that body and physical form as well as essence and spirit are part of a holistic whole and mutually constitutive. The relation of the two is like that between ruler (mind, spirit) and the state (body, physical form). Thus, to keep the body alive it is essential to nourish the spirit. To do so, Xi Kang insists that remaining dispassionate and maintaining internal equanimity is best. This is, because strong feelings not only change often, but also do harm to the body. The best status is, as Xi Kang notes, "Let love and hate not dwell in your feelings; anguish and delight not stay in your thoughts."

Second, one should avoid wealth and rank to preserve oneself from danger and harm. The logic is simple: the more one is endowed with high rank and wealth, the higher chances are that one gets involved in harm and danger. This was especially true in Xi Kang's time, when the political climate was harsh and there were many power struggles among elite groups. This intense atmosphere is conspicuously showcased in one of his poems, entitled *Da er Guo sanshou, qi san* 答二郭三首, 其三 (A Response to the Two Guos, Three Poems, No. III). Here he expresses his grief and worries about the situation that "the tactical and strategic vie with one another, "leading to alienation in people's relationship. This makes him feel that "fame and position cannot be maintained" (Owen and Swartz 2017, 330-31).

Third, Xi Kang holds the strong opinion that what people eat has an effect on their life expectancy. He says, "The essence of whatever we eat impacts inner nature and stains the body; there is nothing that does not affect something else" (Dai 2014, 254; Henricks 1983, 25). Based on his reference to the *Shennong bencao jing*, Xi Kang outlines two different kinds of food that lead to different reactions as they enter people's bod-

ies. The first is fragrant and delightful when eaten but decays rapidly within. It exhausts vital energy, defiles the spirit, and poisons the six viscera—in fact reducing health, decreasing life, and shortening blessings. Examples include meat, grain, and wine.

The second, which Xi Kang favors enthusiastically, involves are certain herbal and mineral remedies, such as *liuquan* 流泉 (flowing fountain) or *ganli* 甘醴 (sweet spring), *qiongrui* 瓊蕊 (agate stamens), *yuying* 玉英 (jade glow), *liudan* 留丹 (red sulphur), *shijun* 石菌 (stone mushroom), *zizhi* 紫芝 (purple fungus), *huangjing* 黃精 (yellow essence), and so on[8]. Ingesting these, the body becomes light and long life is attained, a feature that continued later in the Daoist school of Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清).

Overall, Xi Kang articulates the various reasons why most people cannot achieve the goal of long life and outlines how they tend to be skeptical about the effectiveness of the various herbs and minerals and maintain no perseverance in the process of nurturing life. They tend to expect instant effects and short-term gain, which is the main reason they ultimately fail.

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[8] In general, they are all for longevity or transcendence. Specifically, *liuquan* or *ganli* refer to forms of spring water. *Qiongrui* indicates the stamens of the agate tree, which grows on Mount Kunlun and is said to be eaten by the transcendents for longevity (Yin and Guo 1986, 184). The *Kangxi Dictionary* notes that the stamens of the agate tree were eaten for longevity. *Yuying* too is ingested for longevity. The *Shejian* 涉江(Crossing the Yangtze) section of the *Chuci* reads: "Climbing Mount Kunlun to eat the flowers of jade, [I will] live as long as Heaven and Earth, and glow as bright as the sun and the moon." *Liudan* in other editions appears as *jindan* 金丹 (golden cinnabar). The *Baopuzi* 抱樸子 ("Jindan" chapter) describes it as the "highest medicine" （*shangyao* 上藥）and also calls it *hufen* 胡粉 or *shiliudan* 石流丹. It is generally used in the production of the elixir (Yin and Guo1986, 184; Hu 1995, 1374; Henricks 1983, 56-57). *Shijun* is a divine plant, eaten by the immortals and found on the isles in the middle of the ocean (Henricks 1983, 57; Yai and Guo 1986, 184). *Zizhi* may refer to ganoderma or auriculariales, but in all cases is a plant eaten to lighten the body and gain longevity (Henricks1983, 57; Yin and Guo 1986, 184). *Huangjing* is also called "deer bamboo" or "hare bamboo", a mountain plant (Henricks 1983, 57; Kohn 2012, 121; also Kohn 2010, 146).

Xi Kang further pays particular attention to the notion of vital energy (*qi*). Echoing the *Zhuangzi*, he notes that transcendents are beings endowed with a special form of *qi* and, since *qi* is most easily accessible through respiration, he places great emphasis on the practice of breathing exercise. For example, after insisting that one should dispassionate and peaceful inside, he proposes the practice of "breathing by expelling and absorbing" (*huxi tuna* 呼吸吐納), a way of referring to the well-known practice of expelling the old and absorbing the new [breath] (*tugu naxin* 吐古納新). He says,

> Therefore, he cultivates his nature to protect his spirit and calms his mind to keep his body intact. Love and hate do not dwell in his feelings; anguish and delight do not stay in his thoughts. Quiet is he and unmoved, his body and breath harmonious and still. Moreover, he breathes to expel the old and absorbs the new, then takes herbal drugs to nourish his health, causing form and spirit to draw together and surface and the interior to benefit alike. (Dai 2014, 253; Henricks 1983, 24)

Xi Kang further classifies food based on the smell of their *qi* that is, whether they are fragrant or odorous, thus connecting dietary methods to the understanding and practice of *qi*.

All this showcases his combination of spiritual breathing methods with ingesting certain drugs for physical longevity. That is, he presents an absorption of heterogeneous resources such as nourishing the spirit (*yangshen* 養神) and physically preserving the body—another feature that also appears in medieval and later Daoism.

His mastery of these religious knowledge, moreover, inevitably affected his poetry writing. This holds true not only for vocabulary and imagery of his poems on roaming into transcendence, but also for the set sequence of topics in his work.[9] This also showed his close linkage with previous traditions such as poems of the Jian'an period (196-220) and

[9] This set sequence of topics led Sun Changwu to judge the language and representation skills of Xi Kang's poetry monotonous and repetitive (2005, 200). Owen (2006) and Kirkova (2016) present a sophisticated analysis of this sequence. Owen attributes it to "an analogue of Daoism" (Owen 2006, 140), while Kirkova addresses these Journey depicting as discussing "way" to immortality (2016, 203). No matter what, the religious impact is apparent.

yuefu of Han, though his tireless interest in directive quoting or sophisticated elaboration of Lao-Zhuang in poetry bestowed him certain specialness.[10] This slot typically starts with a particular roaming scene such as riding on clouds, driving a chariot drawn by dragons, and more. From here, they move on to outline the main plot of meeting one or several transcendents, sometimes generically called spirit man (*shenren* 神人) or perfected (*zhenren* 真人) and in some cases named individually as, for example, Wangzi Qiao 王子喬. The divine figure(s) commonly grants the mysterious medicine, then followed the narrative telling the ingestion of drugs or other transformation techniques, such as collecting herbs. Then, toward the end of the poem, the protagonist himself turns into an immortal and ascends into the empyrean.

A slightly different variant sets out by specifying the hardships and risks involved in living in the ordinary world of political chaos and intrigue, then moves on to express a strong the yearning for ascension, as a way to escape from the grief of life. While poems of this kind are not typically classified as "roaming into transcendence," they supplement the theme and serve to outline a yet different dimension of this kind of poetry and help to understand its larger context. They present the worldly entanglement of the quest for transcendence and remind us of the equally important aspect of the compositional background on which Xi Kang wrote his poems on roaming. Although he had a keen interest in pursuing transcendence and was deeply sincere in this endeavor, his religious concerns also closely entangled with the mundane world, which he had to inhabit by necessity. This at the same time also reflects a long-enduring pattern of life among premodern Chinese literati: being an immortal-like recluse still served certain temporal functions, just as working as a Confucian official never hindered religious engagement.

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[10] Owen and Swartz (2017) elaborate this specialness in the treatise focusing on Xi Kang and Ruan Ji (2017, 262). Further, his direct quoting or sophisticated elaboration of Lao-Zhuang, not only show his pioneering position as a Xuanyan poet (Swartz 2018, 45- 48), but also indicate his broad mastery and his own proposition in longevity and transcendence, if we do not just take Lao-Zhuang as "philosophy" and should has no relation to the called "religious Daoism" (Wen 2006, 120-126). Finally, he developed these heterogeneous sources into a new poetic language.

The Poems

Many of Xi Kang's poems on roaming into transcendence use terminology related to nourishing life in connection with classical Daoist concepts, such as making all things equal and nurturing life, free and easy wandering, roaming in Great Clarity, and the like (Owen and Swartz 2017, 351, 269, 301). He also invokes visions of freedom in flight, childlike joy, simplicity, and escape as well as actions of picking herbs, ingesting elixirs, and ascending into the pure sky. For example,

> **Poem on Roaming into Transcendence**
> ……
> Wang Qiao lifts me up and takes me away;
> We ride the clouds, drive a chariot of six dragons.
> Floating and fluttering, we sport in the Garden of Mystery;
> Along the road, we meet Huang and Lao.
> They teach me the Way of the Natural,
> All becomes clear like a childlike simplicity burgeoning forth.
> We pick herbs in a nook on Mount Zhong,
> And we ingest elixirs, which transform our appearance.
> As cicadas shed their shells, casting away filth and entanglements,
> I become friends with the immortals and settle on Bantong.[11]

These lines document the bold and comprehensive tradition that Xi Kang inherited from the *Chuci*, poems of the Jian'an period (196-220), as well as the contemporaneous philosophical discourse of Mystery Learning (Owen and Swartz 2017, 262). In addition, they also indicate his close relation to the prevailing religious tradition of Daoism at his time and his adaptation of immortals' lore and the visions of Zhuang zi. The abundant religious ideas, just as his comprehensive heritage of literary tradition and pioneering adoption of "philosophy", should also be fully noted and contribute to the whole understanding of Xi Kang's works.

More specifically, the poem speaks of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi (Huang-Lao 黃老), two ancient Daoist figures who became central to Han dynasty Daoist teachings and emphasize the importance of the

[11] 王喬弃我去, 乘雲駕六龍. 飄颻戲玄圃, 黃老路相逢. 授我自然道, 曠若發童蒙. 採藥鍾山隅, 服食改姿容. 蟬蛻棄穢累, 結友家板桐 (Dai 2014, 65; Owen and Swartz 2017, 305).

way of naturalness or spontaneity (*ziran dao* 自然道), allowing the protagonist to return to the simplicity of childhood. It also contains direct quotations regarding Daoist techniques of self-cultivation: by picking herbs and ingesting elixirs, the protagonist changes his appearance and can make friends in Bantong 板桐, a place on Mont Kunlun, the central world mountain and major realm of the transcendents. Here he meets divine beings and engages in new friendships.

In addition, the poem also describes another place where the protagonist goes after his ascension by "riding the clouds," "driving a chariot of six dragons," and "floating and fluttering." This place is the legendary "hanging garden" (*xuanpu* 懸圃), again a location on Mount Kunlun. It is yet another type of the transcendent realm where the protagonist encounters both divine figures who provide him with the elixir of life and also the way of naturalness or spontaneity, the ultimate inherent flow of cosmic oneness. Xi Kang here showed a comprehend-siveness in absorption of Lao-Zhuang "philosophy" and what we called the religious Daoism ideas.

The same mixture is also apparent in another poetic series, notably the *Chongzuo, siyanshi qishou* 重作四言詩七首 (Seven Stanzas of Recomposed Tetrasyllabic Verse), and here specifically in the fifth and sixth.

The Fifth Stanza
Repudiate wisdom, discard learning,
Let your mind roam in the dark silence of the Mystery.
Repudiate wisdom, discard learning,
Let your mind roam in the dark silence of the Mystery.
When you commit a fault, how should you regret it?
…
That which pleased him was merely one domain.
With loosened hair, he sang as he strolled,
And a harmonious vapor filled within the four borders.
I make a song to express this:
Let your mind roam in the dark silence of the Mystery.[12]

[12] 絕智棄學, 遊心於玄默. 絕智棄學, 遊心於玄默. 過而弗悔, 當不自得. . . .所樂一國. 被髮行歌, 和氣四塞. 歌以言之, 遊心於玄默 (Dai 2014, 82; Owen and Swartz 2017, 318).

This presents a take on the ideal life as presented by Laozi and Zhuangzi. For example, the line, "Repudiate wisdom, discard learning" originates from the *Daode jing* sayings, "Cut off sageliness, get rid of wisdom" (ch. 19) and "Abandon learning and be free from sorrow" (ch. 20) (Ryden 2008, 41-43).

The following lines, moreover, have their roots in the *Zhuangzi*. More specifically, "Let your mind roam in the dark silence of the mystery" comes from chapter 5 ("The Sign of Virtue Complete"), while the phrase "Commit a fault but not regret it, do something right but not be self-satisfied" is the ideal state of mind maintained by the perfected as described in chapter 6 ("The Great and Venerable Teacher"). "With loosened hair, sang as he strolled" similarly connects to a story found in *Zhuangzi* 19 ("Mastering Life"). Finally, "A harmonious vapor filled within the four borders," though commentators' presupposition varies, they all revealed that this expression relates to the life philosophy advocated by *Zhuangzi* (Dai 2014, 84). The concept "harmony" also invokes the very sentence in *Laozi*: "Carrying yin and embracing yang, merge into harmony through the coalescence of these force " (Owen and Swartz 2017, 403). In other words, the fifth stanza can be said to closely reflect and be directly inherited from the ideas of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi.*

In contrast, the next section, which closely follows this one, presents more mythological aspects:

The Sixth Stanza
I long with Wang Qiao
To ride the clouds and roam the Eight Extremes.
I long with Wang Qiao
To ride the clouds and roam the Eight Extremes.

Swiftly we traverse the Five Marchmounts
And speedily travel a myriad leagues.
He'd bestow divine drugs upon me
To make me grow feathered wings.

I breathe in the air of Great Harmony,
Which smelts my form and changes my countenance.
make a song to express this:

I long to travel to and roam the Eight Extremes.[13]

Here Xi Kang shows the aspiration to roam into the heavenly spheres with a well-known immortal figure, Wang Ziqiao, and couches this desire in the format of the classic roaming scene: riding the clouds and traveling across large areas in a very short time, closely matching the *Yuanyou* song in the *Chuci*. Also, he mentions the taking of drugs and the practice of breathing techniques. After receiving divine drugs, the protagonist gains feathered wings, matching a typical metaphor and major symbol found in many descriptions of transcendence from the Han dynasty onward (Li 2010, 3). Susan Huang similarly unveils the long-standing Daoist tendency to link humans and birds, apparent both in visual art and literary writings (2012, 135-64). In addition, in the esoteric nomenclature system, the term "Great Harmony" (*taihe* 太和) reads: "The mouth is the Jade Pond, the Palace of Great Harmony" in the *Huangting jing* 黃庭經 (Yellow Court Scripture) (Kohn 1993, 184).[14] All this sets the scene for the protagonist, in the following lines, to change his form and countenance, that is, to become a transcendent.

From the foregoing, apparently, both what we called the "philosophical" and the "religious" content present in Xi Kang's work as important components. Their content further documents that Xi Kang's writing was based strongly on traditional sources and inherited from ancient Daoist classics. For example, when he describes the progress of his journey, the imagery invokes "riding the clouds" and "driving a chariot of six dragons," which is not only reminiscent of the portrait of the spirit man in the *Zhuangzi* but also of the mysterious ascent in the *Chuci*. The *Zhuangzi* has：

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[13] 思與王喬, 乘雲遊八極. 思與王喬, 乘雲遊八極. 凌厲五嶽, 忽行萬億. 授我神藥, 自生羽翼. 呼吸太和, 鍊形易色. 歌以言之, 思行遊八極 (Dai 2014, 84; Owen and Swartz 2017, 320).

[14] Although *taihe* also indicates the "undifferentiated state of yin and yang," I believe the term here refers to body-cultivation techniques. There is some controversy about the date of the *Huangting jing*, but it is almost certainly later than Xi Kang. Still, it appears that they share certain body cultivation techniques, mastered by Xi Kang and also applied by Shangqing practitioners.

> Far away on Mount Gushe, there lived a spirit man. His flesh and skin were like ice and snow. His manner was elegant and graceful as that of a maiden. He did not eat any of the five grains but inhaled the wind and drank the dew. He rode on clouds, drove along the flying dragons, and thus rambled beyond the four seas. (Fung 2016, 5)

Plus, the *Yuanyou* contains the phrase:

> Driving eight undulating dragons,
> Cloud banners flying in rolling waves. (Sukhu 2017, 194)

These lines form part of many similar expressions about transcendents and descriptions of how they roam through the empyrean, that can commonly be traced back to these two texts. In other words, their imagery and language profoundly influenced later descriptions, both in religious and literary texts, including also the work of Xi Kang.

The ancient classics are both religious and literary in nature. They use a language with high literary value and abound in creative and wondrous metaphors while also containing abundant religious information and speaking of religious activities related to the divine world and supernatural beings. Many scholars have emphasized this point. For example, the *Jiuge* 九歌 (Nine Songs) section of the *Chuci*, thought to be related to shamanic activity, speaks of the Xiang River Goddess or the Lady of the Xiang River (Kohn1992; Gopal 2017). The close relationship between terms in *Zhuangzi* and Daoist meditation and ritual, such as "withered wood" (*kumu* 枯木), "dead ashes" (*sihui* 死灰), has also been revealed (Meulenbeld, 2010).

The *Yuanyou*, in particular, is often taken to be the direct model or forerunner of the poems on roaming into transcendence. Not only does it outline the protagonist's progress into the heavenly spheres, but it also integrates certain self-cultivation notions from Daoism. For example, it mentions that "I sup on the six vital energies and quaff the damps of coldest midnight, rinse my mouth with truest sunlight and imbibe the aurora of dawn."[15] As Paul Kroll points out, the poem depicts the mysteries of the otherworld and a magnificent journey there, the free roam-

[15] 餐六氣而飲沆瀣兮, 漱正陽而含朝霞.

ing among the stars—all "key practices of concentrated visualization, undertaken by for medieval Daoist adepts" (1996). In short, the ancient texts that Xi Kang cites in his writing, are deeply imbued in religious ideas and practices.

Temporal Functions and Worldly Entanglement

Beyond this, with an empathetic view to look Xi Kang as a man ever truly lived in society, we can observe that the various religious aspects and sincere beliefs inevitably entangled with worldly aspect, serving certain temporal functions. A view on this is also trial of a holistic approach: not departing from concept, rather from the phenomena's complexity itself. Also, the exploration of immortal-like recluse such as Xi Kang, also offer us a vivid example of an enduring life-pattern of Chinese Literati's living: an immortal-like seclusion does not necessarily mean the whole cut-off from the world, while keeping officialdom can also mean actively engagement in religious ideas and practice.[16]

This worldly entanglement can also be discernable in Xi Kang's poems. Not only the works are typically known as "lyrical self-expression",[17] such as the *Siqin shi* 思親詩 (Thinking of My Loved Ones) and *Youzhen shi* 憂憤詩 (My Indignation in Confinement), the same holds true for Xi Kang's poems on roaming into transcendence, which again echoes its forerunner *Yuanyou*.

More specifically, there are two needs anchored deeply in reality that drive the protagonist to seek transcendence: one is his desire to escape from real dangers in life, most importantly related to politics; the other is, the urge to get away from annoying mundane people and replace human with more divine contacts, seeking close friendship and

[16] Alan Berkowitz has found this "duality," although he somehow subordinates the religious aspect of reclusion when comparting its secularity character, although he repeatedly finds the religion's (Daoism or Buddhism) "permeation" and "suffusion" not only in the reclusion practice this time, but in "all of Chinese society as well for the next millennium" (2000, 2-13). I agree that the rather-secular seclusion pursuit "might also have included religious concerns (2000, 13).

[17] This term "self-expressive lyricism" is used following the concise survey of traditional poetry development provided by the *Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature* (Denecke, Li, and Tian 2017, 241-54).

deep understanding. The latter is clearly apparent in Xi Kang's *Shuzhi shi* 述志詩 (Telling of My Intent), Another example appears in the following:

> **A Response to the Two Guos, Three Poems, III:**
> Looking closely at the disarray of the world's affairs,
> Piles of danger, there is much grief and fright.
> Bestowal and recompense exchange as in a marketplace.
>
> The Great Way is concealed and will not unfold.
> When even along a leveled road, one meets thorns and brambles;
> For a comfortable stroll, where is one to go?
>
> The tactical and strategic vie with one another;
> Fame and position cannot be maintained.
> The simurgh avoids the ensnaring net,
> Consigning itself afar to a mound on Kunlun.[18]

As Xi Kang himself confessed and closely observed, his were hard times to live in. As he described in the first part here, there is much sorrow in life, and he constantly confronts unpredictable dangers. The world is in a grave of chaos and disorder, and most people engage in relationship only on an entirely utilitarian basis, taking and giving favor like a trade and exchanging benefits one for another. Living in this world is like walking on thistles and thorns: it almost impossible to move at ease. Then the question arises, "Where is one to go?" There really is no place: the poet is entirely helpless in these troubled times.

In concrete terms, Xi Kang's lifetime saw severe power struggles and hard fighting. "A very difficult time in Chinese history" (Henricks 1983), these were years of constant warfare, factionalism, and intrigue. The reality function of Xi Kang's writings about roaming into transcendence, then, concerns this very concrete and specific situation, when fame and position—especially one of high rank—had become a grave danger. Under these circumstances, his views of nourishing life and preserving oneself, complete with his recall of the ideas of Laozi and Zhuangzi, not

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[18] 答二郭三首, 其三：詳觀淩世務. 屯險多憂虞. 施報更相市. 大道匿不舒. 夷路值枳棘. 安步將焉如. 權智相傾奪. 名位不可居. 鸞鳳避罻羅. 遠托昆侖墟.

only represent an intellectual interest but reflect a close personal need and individual choice under the extreme conditions of his life.

The last line of the poem, therefore, reflects his urgent will to escape from his contemporary world: his aspiration to "consigning himself afar to a mound on Kunlun." In this sense, Xi Kang's seeking for transcendence is not only a religious endeavor, although that forms an undeniable and important dimension of it, but also relates to his resolution on how best to live in a world of chaos.

Another practical need is the urge to get away from mundane people whom he despises, seeking instead those who truly "know their self" (*zhiji* 知己), that is, true and close friends. In Xi Kang's mind, such a friend ideally is a transcendent, someone not of this world whom he can trust fully. His wish for such companionship is expressed clearly in his poetry. For example:

> **Telling of My Intent: The First Poem**
> The submerged dragon nurtures his divine body,
> Bathing his scales, sporting in the thoroughwort pond.
> Craning his neck, he yearns for Dating;
> Resting his feet, he waits for Fu Xi
> …
> Common men are not my compeers,
> I am slow to follow the ways of the vulgar.
> It is difficult to fit in with a different kind:
> Their base opinions scatter and spread all over.
> On this rough and ragged path, I encounter regret and shame
> For my long-held intent cannot be carried out.
>
> Plowing and weeding so moved Ning Yue.
> A saddle blanket for a mat roused Zhang Yi.
> I shall go and leave behind this crowd of fellow men.
> With a whip in hand, I pursue after Hong Ya.
>
> The brown Peng-bird shakes his six quill-feathers,
> How could nets restrain him?
> Drifting and roaming in the Great Purity,
> Again, I search for new acquaintances.
> Wing beside wing, we soar through the Milky Way,

Drinking dew and supping on carnelian branches.[19]
(Owen and Swartz 2017, 302)

The first three lines here depict the divine animal, that is, they focus on the dragon's actions and appearance—quite possibly a self-portrait of Xi Kang himself. The third to sixth lines present the dragon's longing and desire to meet with Fu Xi, the legendary ruler of antiquity. However, auspicious signs have not appeared, which means that the encounter cannot yet be successful. Thus, the dragon has to pace back and forth on the mountain—quite clearly an image of being trapped in space and time while also expressing his impatience and the fact that his intent is not being fulfilled.

The following couplet points out what the specific plight is. As a proud and unique being, the dragon/poet has a hard time to fit in with "the vulgar" and he is deeply bothered by the scattered and spread-out "base opinion" of the masses, yet also full of regret and shame. This is resolved by his pursuit of the ancient immortal Hong Ya and the appearance of the mythical Peng bird, a figure prominent in the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. The bird, yet another symbol of the poet, is not trapped and restrained any more. The protagonist rises into the immortal realm of Great Purity, where he hopes he can find his true friend. The logic here uses the imagery of roaming into transcendence as a way of escaping "common people" while searching for a true friend and celestial companion.

A similarly progression appears in the second poem of this cycle:

Telling of My Intent: The Second Poem
The little quail stakes a claim to artemesia shrubs
It looks up to laugh at how the divine phoenix flies.
A caved-in well serves as the dwelling for the mayfly and frog,
The divine tortoise — where does he return to? . . .
With impassioned indignation, I think of the ancients;
In my dreams, I see their radiant countenance.

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[19] 潛龍育神軀．躍鱗戲蘭池．延頸慕大庭．寢足俟皇羲…　悠悠非吾匹, 疇肯應俗宜．殊類難徧周. 鄙議紛流離. 轗軻丁悔吝. 雅志不得施. 耕耨感寧越. 馬席激張儀. 逝將離羣侶. 杖策追洪崖. 焦股振六翮. 羅者安所羈. 浮游太清中. 更求新相知. 比翼翔雲漢. 飲露餐瓊枝.

I long to meet someone who will understand me,

So I may express my frustrations, open up my hidden subtleties.
Cliffs and caves have many recluses,
Lightly I take off in search of my teacher
At daybreak, I ascend to the top of Mount Ji.
As the sun sets, I am not aware of any hunger.
Living in seclusion, I nurture my soul
So that for a thousand years I shall long be at peace. [20]
(Owen and Swartz 2017, 302)

In the opening of this poem, the divine beings, the phoenix and the divine tortoise, are teased and expelled by the quail, mayfly, and frog. Next, the work again expresses the feeling of not fitting in with the world. The protagonist yearns for close companionship and longs for an encounter with a true friend, then expresses his vision of associating with recluses in caves and on cliffs, becoming ever lighter and rising up in a religious way to transcendence.

The key difference between the two poems is the scene of seeking transcendence. In the second, it is embellished with mountains, cliffs, and caves, showcasing a typical change of the transcendent realm, which is said to be related with the Daoism's development too. This is what Xi Kang's *youxian* poems contribute to the theme**:** not only traditional transcendents and their realms are featured, but escape can also be attained through a life in the mountains (sometimes related to Daoist sacred topography) and a lifestyle of seclusion[21]—a yet other destination of transcendence. This indicates an emerging change in picturing roaming into transcendence regarding this theme (Li, 2010a, 1-8; Li, 2010b, 1-49).

But still, it echoes the *Yuanyou* and other works in the *Chuci*. As David Hawkes points out, the private self-expression part is nearly always

[20] 斥鷃擅蒿林. 仰笑神鳳飛. 坎井蝤蛙宅. 神龜安所歸. … 慷慨思古人. 夢想見容輝. 願與知己遇. 舒憤啟幽微 . 巖穴多隱逸 . 輕舉求吾師 . 晨登箕山巔. 日夕不知饑. 玄居養營魄. 千載長自綏.

[21] Yet regarding reclusion, there is also another type called "hiding within the court" (*chaoyin* 朝隱), which take seclusion as a state of mind and may face the accuse of reclusion belongs to the polemicist (Berkowitz2000, 7). Here, we are just regarding the actualized reclusion other the nominal.

accompanied with the imaginary, supernatural journey, until poems created at the imperial court and to a more refined taste, such the *Daren fu*, came to excluded the former elements.[22] The *Yuanyou* has,

> Grieving at the pressing constraints of the age's vulgarity, I wish to rise up lightly, to roam far off.
> For this body frail and lowly, there is no way to do so—How may I compel it to mount up, to be borne above? (Kroll 1996, 660)[23]

The writer first gives the reason and motivation for his desire to roam far away, that is, he feels grieved at the situation of life during his time. Behind this grief, there is also a mentality of being unwilling to conform to the mundane, a strong urge to be different and extraordinary. Following this, the text presents the resolution and ultimate result: the move toward roaming into the heavens by becoming light in body and rising up to meet the immortals.[24]

This worldly entanglement with seeking transcendence may have been less unnatural for people in ancient times than it would be today: they could take transcendence on as a "functional project" when facing problems in real life, bolstered by a strong and sincere belief in diving beings and the otherworld.

Conclusion

Both Xi Kang as a person and his poems on roaming into transcendence should be understood from a more holistic perspective, which includes both an undeniable and nonnegligible commitment to religious ideas and practices plus a temporal function in facing the rather depressing reality of his time. The close entanglement between the transcendent and worldly aspects serves as a vivid example of an enduring life-pattern, which not only belongs to Xi Kang but marks the overarching mode of

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[22] Hawkes summarize two types of work in *Chuci*: Tristia and Itineraria. Tristia is more private personal expression of the poet, especially towards "a deluded prince, a cruel fate, a corrupt, malicious and uncomprehending society," while Itineraria is often imaginary, mystic journey that is seldomly a real one (1967, 82).

[23] 悲時俗之迫厄兮, 願輕舉而遠遊. 質菲薄而無因兮, 焉托乘而上扶?

[24] This motivation is also analyzed and summarized in Kohn 1992, 83-84.

life among traditional literati, albeit with variants over time. Throughout his life, Xi Kang's public concern with Confucian officialdom never disappeared, although he tended to show a distaste for official positions.[25] His sincere interest in seeking transcendence and appearing as a famous immortal-like hermit, on the other hand, secured him a place of personal integrity: while avoiding political intrigue in the world, he mentally settled deeply in his aspirations for seeking the otherworld.

Religious aspects pervade his work. Specifically, his *Yangsheng lun* showcases a comprehensive mastery of approaches to longevity. As expressed here, Xi Kang focused on the two key aspects of mind and body, sprit and form. That is, he insisted it was necessary to both nourish the spirit and physically preserve the body. In his description of these features, moreover, he shows a clear influence of the Daoist tradition, using both the *Daode jing* and the *Zhuangzi* as inspiring theoretical models while also integrating longevity techniques for bodily preservation.

Further, in his poems on roaming into transcendence, he also reveals the intellectual heritage of the classics, such as the *Laozi, Zhuangzi, Shijing*, *Chuci*, and Jian'an poetry. Although often considered mainstays of the literary or philosophical tradition and under the classification scheme of secular narratives, the classics themselves contain extensive religious features and are sacred in the Chinese tradition. To a certain degree, they reflect shamanistic and official ritual practices, speak of divine entities, and offer guidance toward spiritual enlightenment. Particularly, Xi Kang's direct citations from, and sophisticated elaboration of, Lao-Zhuang materials in his poems make him distinct him from his predecessors, such as the poets of the Jian'an period and the rhapsodies of the Han. This also bestows upon him the pioneering position of a new poetic, leading to a new key trend within this kind of poetry. This, too, emerges on the basis of his interest in transcendence.

In Xi Kang's *Youxian shi*, then, sincere religious beliefs and secular concerns exist closely side by side. Religious notions, ideas, and practices followed with true sincerity have a strong impact on worldly consideration since they encourage the adoption of a transcendent perspective and life-style to deal with a dismal reality. Sometimes, this leads in fact to

[25] The details imply that Xi Kang may have had relations with an anti-Sima revolt (Sun and Owen 2010, 181; Owen and Swartz 2017, 252).

seclusion, revealing a particular attitude toward the world and politics. More specifically, there are two main functions: one is to survive under in harsh political situation; the other is to escape from annoying mundane people, at least in the heart-and-mind. The entanglement of these aspects appears clearly in his poems.

Seeing the complexity from a holistic perspective provides a more comprehensive way, not only to understand Xi Kang as a unique individual—his cultural accomplishments and his particular life choices—but also opens a view of the prevailing lifestyle pattern of intellectuals in this period of history and by extension other times in pre-modern China. It shows that the role of the literati as Confucian officials never hindered their engagement in religious ideas and practices, just as their pursuit of transcendence was always also linked with temporal concerns.

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