

A CHINESE CONCEPTION OF THE HERO

Whoever knows a little about China—even very little—knows, in one way or another, about the Taoist Immortals, although our knowledge may be limited to the representation of them on a bit of sculptured jade, on a Han mirror or in some wood engraving. One has heard of them as an essential part of Chinese folklore. In the book of Taoist saints, the *Liesien tchouan*, they may be observed in all their oddness, living on pine cones or the “marrow of stones” and flying off into the air toward the apotheosis of some unknown paradise. This aspect of the Immortals has been studied often and well. But there is another aspect to the Immortals no less important, a philosophical aspect which, I believe, deserves our attention. Sun Yat-sen, the “Father of the Chinese Republic,” is certainly not given the name of “Hidden Immortal” (Yat-sen, Yi-sien) out of a simple interest in folklore, and the heroes of the Chinese novel, Kia Pao-yu of the first *Hong-leou mong*, dedicated themselves to achieve the way of the Immortals for reasons that went deeper and were more intelligent than mere superstitious emulation of some grotesqueries

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of occult folklore. No, the Chinese Immortal is a veritable hero of the same stamp as Saints of the Christian tradition and like the latter he embodies a religious philosophy of the highest inspiration.

My purpose today is to present this Taoist hero as he was conceived by a man of letters of the 3rd century of our era. I have chosen this author because he makes it possible for us to examine the Immortals from several points of view: first as a philosophical conception, then, as a phenomenon which actually existed—we will make a visit with him to a man who was considered to be an Immortal—and, finally, because this author lets us enter into his intimate thoughts and doubts about the very existence of these beings: paradoxically, it is an agnostic who best permits us to understand, I believe, what the Immortal represented for the Chinese of his epoch.

The author of whom I speak is named Jouan Tsi and he lived from 210 to 263 A.D. during the period of the philosophical Renaissance and political and social revolt which preceded what one might call the Chinese Middle Ages. He belonged to the aristocracy and was already renowned during his lifetime as one of the most brilliant writers of the capital; posterity has reserved a very high place for him among the greatest Chinese poets of all time.

His work is naturally divided into two very distinct parts: his poetry and his prose. This division is not simply a formal one; it also describes a very important distinction with regard to the basis of his work. Jouan Tsi's prose seems to represent only an external and scholastic aspect of his thought; his poetry, the deepest and most personal aspects of his emotions. Thus, we should not seek too much for novel or personal elements in the description of the Taoist hero contained in his *Biography of Master Great Man*.

Jouan Tsi contents himself with presenting to us a hero entirely drawn from traditional Taoism, but he does so with so much force and energy, that we cannot help thinking that he is painting the portrait of an ideal which he held to, even if this ideal did not entirely satisfy him.

The first Taoist texts, dating from about the 4th century B.C., and, in particular, the text of *Tchouang-tseu*, offer us two

kinds of heroes: the philosopher, the sage, often represented by Tchouang-tseu himself; and the exceptional beings called Immortals who are found at the boundary between the human and the super-human. These two species are not utterly distinct: the Immortals are also philosophers or sages, and the philosophers are often endowed with powers which we tend to attribute rather to super-human beings. These two categories represent the two poles of the Taoists: the first, the sages, remain closest to ordinary men; they are withdrawn from the world and passions, but they are incapable of realizing that bodily detachment which would give them eternal life; they are born and they die. But the Immortals, called in the text of *Tchouang-tseu* Fulfilled Men, Spirit-Men, or True Men, render themselves corporeally immortal by means of hygienic practices, and thus can enjoy forever a kind of mystical ecstasy which they have experienced. Such a theory is difficult for us to understand, accustomed as we are to conceive of a personal soul which can—and even must—separate itself from the body in order to unite with the Absolute at the moment of mystical ecstasy. We are repulsed at the thought that matter can participate in such a union. But the Chinese do not distinguish so clearly what we consider—or at least what classic philosophy considered—as the two distinct aspects of man. To the Chinese, man was a microcosm which it was necessary to keep intact in order to keep him alive.

We find the following description of the Immortals in the first chapter of the *Tchouang-tseu*:

Far away on mount Kou-ye reside the Men-Spirits. Their flesh and their skin are like ice and snow; they are subtle and gracious as virgins. They eat no grain but breathe the wind and drink the dew. They rise on the mist of clouds; they lead flying dragons; and thus they wander beyond the Four Seas (that is, beyond the world). When they focus their minds, they keep creatures safe from epidemics, and see to it that there is a good harvest every year.

These Immortals of Tchouang-tseu are the direct ancestors of Jouan Tsi's Great Man. Like them, and by a rather unexpected shift of powers, they derive their magical talents from the fact that they are so free of everything partial, egotistical and personal in themselves, that they become identified with the universe, and this identification liberates them of the weight of themselves.

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Thus they are enabled to stroll through space like solitary atoms. On the other hand, they are so strictly linked to nature that they might be considered responsible for its cycles, the ripening of grain, etc.

The *Biography of Master Great Man* by Jouan Tsi is written in precisely the same manner, a tone of liberation from the relativistic world which one finds in the second chapter of *Tchouang-tseu*. The entire *Biography* is a sort of poetical dialectic of grandeur or freedom whereby Jouan Tsi tries—successively negating the partial points of view of three so-called great men—to arrive at a state of absolute grandeur or absolute freedom in which man finds himself released of everything binding him to the world such as we know it: he is released from human society, from space, from weight, and from time. The structure of the *Biography* is relatively simple. There is a short description of the Great Man, followed by three rather distinct sections in which the Great Man is seen mocking in turn three human types: the bigoted social Confucianist; the upright, but bitter, politician who has retired from the world in disdain and hatred; and the simple wood gatherer, a fatalist living outside of the passions of this world, but, withal, a man of very small vision, ignorant of the real cosmic grandeur of the way of living of a Taoist hero. After having disembarassed himself of these inferior beings, the Great Man lets himself go on into a long description, sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse, of his cosmic life and of his inter-stellar and extra-universal rambles. The exalted tone of this section, longest of the work, recalls Nietzsche's best pages. The last section is a very short coda leading us back to earth by a brief critique of ordinary man incapable of following the Great Man in his flights above the world of distinctions and pettiness.

The *Biography of Master Great Man* belongs to the great literary tradition of shamanist writings, a tradition going back to at least the 4th century B.C. in China. This tradition, therefore, was fully "civilized" when Jouan Tsi wrote more than half a millennium later. Thus, we need not dwell too long on superficial resemblances to other traditional writings. It is clear, from the beginning, that Jouan Tsi's shaman, Master Great Man, is based on a philosophy, and not on ancient folklore or magic

practices. This philosophy is the mystical philosophy of Tchouang-tseu, as is clear from the very first paragraph of the *Biography*. According to Jouan Tsi, the Master:

considered ten thousand leagues like one step, a thousand years like a morning. When he walked he arrived nowhere; when he stopped he found himself nowhere. All his searchings were in the Great Tao and he took no temporary lodging.

From the Absolute point of view, everything is relative: distance, time; and since the Great Man knows that, and since he regards everything as perfectly united, not admitting of any real particularization, he cannot proceed to any particular place, he cannot reside anywhere, because he is in the One, the Tao. One could even go further: the Great Man is not only *in* the One—for that would imply a contradiction—he *is* the One. His complete impartiality renders him capable of assimilating himself with this unity in the complexity which is our world. *He becomes the world itself.*

The first section of the *Biography* is by far the most celebrated, because Jouan Tsi deals with the most important of his interlocutors—the Confucianist—and also because he deals most violently with him. A letter was sent to Master Great Man describing the virtues of the perfect Confucianist, ending in asking him how he can resist the obvious charms of a personality of such high morals. Here is the beginning of the letter:

Nothing in the universe is more honored than an upright man (Confucianist). He always wears the same colors; his expression is composed according to fixed rules; his conduct is in agreement with a fixed model; his words obey fixed laws. When he begins to stand up, he bends himself in two at right angles with his hands folded in front of him as if he were holding a drum. For each one of his activities and his rest there is a rule...(for all his movements) there is a well fixed law. His prudence is renewed every day; he carefully chooses the ground on which to walk. His heart is, as it were, ice-clogged, so full is it of fear and respect. He disciplines himself; he cultivates himself...His only fear is to commit some fault.

The Confucianist lives in a closed universe where everything is completely ordered; a little place is assigned to him where he must remain during his life: it is enough for him to follow Confucianist rules in order to achieve riches, happiness, and

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glory. The Confucianist seeks to encase himself in a tiny corner, to wall himself around with interdictions regarding morality or even geomancy. But he remains among mankind. Could it be that Master Great Man is not aware of the fact that his solitude and heterodox manner of living have made him the laughing stock of all honest people?

Up there, Master Great Man sighed agreeably, and leaning on the clouds replied to him: "What thou hast said, shows that thou hast understood nothing."

And he develops a more or less complete traditional cosmogony in order to demonstrate the pettiness of Confucianist reasoning judged on a cosmic scale. He continues with an allegory, borrowed, it is true, from Tchouang-tseu, but developed by Jouan Tsi with a great deal of originality. The Great Man speaks to the Confucianist in these terms:

Do you not see those lice dwelling in a pair of breeches? When one of the lice hides in a deep seam or takes refuge in some old silk, he thinks he has found a house of good luck. When, out of discretion, he doesn't dare forsake his seams, or in his battles, he doesn't dare quit the breeches, he thinks he's fighting according to the rules. When he is hungry and bites his man, he thinks he's found an endless source of food. But when the fire crackles on the burning heap (where old clothes are being burned) and their cities are reduced to cinders, their capitals destroyed: then all the lice perish in their breeches and cannot get out! Well then, what difference is there between you, the upright man (Confucianist) who sticks so to your little divisions (ritualists) and a louse in a pair of breeches?

This small bit of bravura, the most celebrated part of the *Biography*, does not fail to come to the point despite its violence. The Confucianist at the time of Jouan Tsi had lost the universalist and truly human feeling which had animated his ancient predecessors. Having become the State religion under the Han dynasty, Confucianism had hardened into pure ritualism and into being the reactionary defender of the social order. On the other hand, it was getting more and more rigid and artificial to the degree that scientific knowledge went beyond it. Philology undermined the traditional interpretations of the Canonical Books. Geography, and especially astronomy, threw cosmology into confusion, and Taoist metaphysics gained more and more ground among the most advanced thinkers.

The Great Man, in any case, cannot be compared with a louse frozen in a pair of breeches: he is not fixed anywhere; he is fluid, subtle, inconstant.

He arrives from the East on a cloud; he commands the West wind. With the Yin he keeps his femininity; supported on the Yang he is male.

He is to be found neither in the East nor in the West; he is neither man nor woman.

To defeat the Confucianist on his own ground, the Great Man then displays his political theories. As one might expect he is a pure anarchist. He even goes much further than the ancient Taoists in that he would abolish all political institutions, even that of the Prince, which no thinker before him had ever dared touch.

But the Great Man pays no heed to political theories and leaves the Confucianist, saying to him:

Now I'm going to fly away beyond heaven and earth, taking the Transformations (of the universe) as my friend. In the morning I will eat in the Valley of the Sun, in the evening I will drink in the Western Sea. I will transform myself according to the mutations (of the universe) in order to bring myself back to the beginning with the Tao...

And following the movement of the earth (and here he goes in the direction of the sun, that is to say, in the direction of time, since it is the sun's rotation which produces day and night) the Great Man remains as young as the universe, eternally re-commencing nature's movement, renewing himself at every instant.

The second man who meets the Great Man is a tender soul disillusioned by man's cruelty since his fall from innocence.

I will not permit men, he says, to be my companions: I prefer to have trees and stones as my neighbors...I see like a bird; I will die like a beast. I've buried myself here and here I will leave my bones; I will not return to my former life!

Having heard about Master Great Man, this man hastens to meet him, feeling that he is a fellow soul.

The Great Man loses no time in undeceiving him. He utters

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a series of paradoxes to show that the Great Man does not commit himself, either one way or the other:

Up above, the Master sketched a rainbow to protect himself from dust, and opened up a snow-parasol to guard himself against the sun's rays. And then he turned around to say (to the bitter man): "The True Man of the Vast Beginning is like the root of the Great (Universe). When he concentrates his breathe and unifies his will, all Creation imbibes its being there. When he withdraws, one does not see his back; when he steps forward, one does not see his face...Thus the Perfect Man has no residence, (nonetheless) he treats the cosmos like his guest...the Perfect Man does not act, (however) the cosmos is his business. He does not know the difference between loving and hating.

A Great Man does not withdraw from the world out of hatred: he hates nothing; he does not deflect himself from one thing in order to go toward another.

The Great Man's third interlocutor is a simple wood gatherer. When the Great Man asks him how he can be satisfied with such a simple life, the wood gatherer replies with a long series of examples drawn from the history of the fall of the great. He ends with a song on the same fatalistic theme. The Great Man approves of it in part, but he finds that the wood gatherer's defeatist philosophy is too narrow. He replies with a song that has become celebrated, in which he takes the theme of the fall of great men and lifts it, as is his custom, to a cosmic level. It is no longer the fall of a dynasty, or of a celebrated man, as the wood gatherer had described it: it is the fall, rather, of the entire world which he is describing, and he derives his particular point of view from it: a proud and absolute indifference. The song begins:

If heaven and earth are smashed to pieces,
And if the six directions open up,
If the stars and constellations fall,
And if the sun and the moon collapse,
I will frisk about and I will leap:
Why should I take such things to heart?

The Great Man is absolutely free—the explosion of the very world itself leaves him indifferent: never having given any importance to anything in this world he would not regret at all if it should split asunder. It is this indifference which serves at

the base of Taoist ethics, as love is at the base of Christian ethics. The Christians believe that the ideal world will be a fraternal world; the Taoists, on the other hand, believe that the ideal world will be one in which men ignore each other, like fish happily swimming in the water. The German romantic, Novalis, in a *Hymne an die Nacht* makes use of an image very close to that of Master Great Man's breaking-up of the world, but in Novalis the result of this cataclysm is very different.

Die Sternwelt wird zerfliessen
Zum goldnen Lebenswein.
Wir werden sie geniessen
Und lichte Sterne sein.
Die Lieb' ist frei gegeben
Und keine Trennung mehr.
Es wogt das volle Leben
Wie ein unendlich Meer...

[The world of the stars will dissolve / Into the golden wine of life. / We are going to savor of it / To become brilliant stars. / Love will be freely given / And we will separate no more. / All life rocks / Like the endless sea.]

This somewhat sweetish tone is very far from that of the Great Man: he is neither hateful, nor filled with love for other beings, and he desires neither to be joined with them nor to remove himself from them.

After having left the wood gatherer, the Great Man, in that part of the *Biography* which recalls somewhat more the tradition of the shamanist stories, walks to the palace of the Immortals, witnesses a mystic ballet given by the Five Emperors, meets some celestial beauties, etc. But "his heart is not pleased to remain for a long time in the same place," and these little folkloristic excursions satisfy him only for a short while: he quits this palace of myths and departs further from the world, englobing the entire cosmos by his attitude of being superbly detached from everything. It is at this moment that one notes a small contradiction in his attitude. While he

Swiftly flies into the rosy morning mist,
Hugely, savagely, unattached,
He goes far away and finds himself alone, companionless.
He leans against a balustrade mounted with jewels and looks back
And he is filled with pity for the suffering of the world below.

The wind shifts.

The Yang-tze and the Yellow River become clear;
There is no more mud in the River Lo!
The clouds disappear:

The True Man comes!
The True Man comes!
There is nothing but joy!

If the Taoist philosophy of Master Great Man does not reveal very much originality, Jouan Tsi's tone, in this strange, very emotional *finale*, betrays the sincerity of his thought. The Immortal who is the Great Man certainly exercises a very strong attraction on Jouan Tsi. But, the Immortal whom he described is scarcely anything else but a philosophical principle—the Absolute showing similarities to Absolutes “described” by mystics at any time. Let us now see if in his life he did not approach a little closer to an Immortal in flesh and blood.

According to certain sources, the *Biography of Master Great Man* was written after a visit which Jouan Tsi made to a Taoist hermit named Souen Teng; other sources claims further that the latter served as model for Master Great Man himself. Let us first read the biography of this personage and then let us visit him with Jouan Tsi.

Souen Teng had no house but he resided in an earthen grotto which he had scooped out of the mountain. In summer he made his shirts out of woven grass; in winter he allowed his hair to grow long to cover himself.

All this shows us that he lived freely in the heart of nature. Chinese modesty does not even permit the Immortals to enter into what the more libertine Europeans would call a state of nature.

Souen Teng loved to read the *Book of Changes* and he played on a single-stringed cithern.

Books in general were condemned by Taoists except for the Three Mysteries, the *Book of Changes*, the great philosophical work which endeavored to explain the universe insofar as it is

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an uninterrupted series of mutations; and the two Taoist classics, the *Tao-tö-king* and the *Tchouang-tseu*. The cithern often accompanies mystic meditations, but this celebrated one-stringed cithern of Souen Teng seems more symbolic than musical: the cithern ordinarily had seven strings; this single-stringed instrument of Souen Teng surely symbolized the One, the unity which is the Tao. The *Biography* continues:

Those who saw him all loved him, and rejoiced to see him.

If the Great Man remains indifferent to everyone and everything, this total indifference means that he regards the everybody with equanimity, with an objectivity which can be as appealing as some of the sentimental and "active" benevolence of a so-called Christian "saint."

Souen Teng was by nature without hatred or anger. Once, he had been thrown into the water, in order to see if he would lose his temper, but when he came out he burst out laughing.

From time to time he wandered among men and certain people in the houses which he passed prepared clothes or food for him. Actually he kept nothing, for, after having made his adieus, he threw it all away.

Which leaves us to understand that he fed himself either simply on his breathe, or on mushrooms or other natural products, and that he had no other need of human sustenance.

Once he went into the mountains of Yi-yang (southwest of Lo-yang) where the charcoal burners lived. Knowing that he was an extraordinary man they spoke to him but Souen Teng didn't answer them. When Wen-ti (that is to say, Ssu-ma Tchao, the government leader at that time) heard about him, he sent Jouan Tsi to see.

The interview between Jouan Tsi and Souen Teng (if it really is he) is described in the *Che-chouo sin-yu* ("New conversations drawn from worldly gossip") and may be considered a typical interview between a superior sage and a neophyte, still incapable of freeing himself from fashionable philosophical or historical discussions. The anecdote begins with a sentence, the pertinence of which only becomes clear much later.

Infantry (Colonel) Jouan's whistling was heard from several hundred paces away.

A True Man suddenly appeared in the Sou-men mountain (where Souen Teng lived north of Lo-yang) and the wood cutters all told stories about him. Jouan Tsi went to see. He found him squatting, his arms around his knees, at the edge of the precipice. Jouan Tsi scaled the mountain to draw close and then sat down, opposite him, his legs crossed (all this is very impolite and against ritual). Jouan Tsi then discussed and criticised all antiquity, from the most ancient times with respect to which he elucidated the solitary and Mysterious Way of the Yellow Emperor and Divine Farmer, up to the more recent period about which he devoted himself to a detailed examination of the excellences and flowering virtue of the Three Dynasties. When he questioned (the True Man) about all this, the latter remained motionless and did not respond. Jouan Tsi again returned to the attack, expounding the Active Doctrine, and the arts of perching the spirit (in the void) and of breath-control. He looked at (the True Man) to see what he thought about all that, but the latter remained as before: his frozen look had not budged.

Then Jouan Tsi emitted a long whistle which lasted for quite a while. Finally, (the True Man) said laughing: "Do it again!" Jouan Tsi began to whistle again and when he had had enough of it, he withdrew to a place halfway up the mountainside. There he heard a sound from on high like the cries of little children (?). It was like several choirs of flutes and drums, and the wooded valley resounded with its echo. When he turned around to discover where these sounds came from, Jouan Tsi saw that the man, whom he had just been with, was simply in the mood for whistling.

This anecdote is connected with a long series of visits made by celebrated men—some legendary, some historic, as in this case—to hermit sages. There are examples from ancient times, in the text of Tchouang-tseu; in the Yu-lou of the Zen Buddhists of the Middle Ages, and in modern novels. And, as in this case, the theme of all these encounters is the negation of reason and all rational effort. Tchouang-tseu makes use of fables and dialectic to show the relativity of our rational knowledge, the Zen Buddhists make use of blows with a stick or eructations; here, an extra-rational whistling wins the sage's approbation when the most erudite and up-to-date discussions remain fruitless. Everything grotesque and supernatural pleases the Immortals, but whistling has further qualifications: it is produced by the breath, the *spiritus*, *pneuma*, *âtman*, which plays a great role in Taoist practice and which is able to produce musical sounds capable, according to Chinese theory, of regulating the universe. Jouan Tsi is out of breath: but the True Man shows him what a man unattached to any partial philosophy or any historical

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current can do: his whistling is the breath of nature itself which Wordsworth heard as "...among the solitary hills low breathings..."

If one may take credence in the authenticity of this story, and I see no reason not to believe it—without, however, putting too much faith in the description of the orchestration of the buccal music of the Taoist saint—Jouan Tsi was in contact with a man who behaved, apart from his trips in space, like a Taoist hero. On the other hand, we know that he had experiences which must be, I think, adjudged "mystic." One reads in his *Biography* that

Jouan Tsi knew how to play the cithern very well. Just at the moment when he succeeded in doing what he wanted to do (in his music), he suddenly forgot his physical body. Many people in his time called him stupid; only his uncle (a famous writer) admired him and said that Jouan Tsi went way beyond him.

We have seen three facets of Jouan Tsi's interest in the Immortals: his *Biography of Master Great Man*, a literary and philosophical evocation; his meeting with a real Taoist hermit; and finally, his mystical tendencies which make him personally appreciate even the gambols of these beings. I would like to end by touching on a fourth facet of this interest—one of the most interesting, and one of the most difficult to clarify: did Jouan Tsi really believe that the Immortals existed, that they were men capable of making inter-stellar voyages such as he describes in his *Biography of Master Great Man*? Obviously, it is very difficult to enter into the mind of a man dead almost two millennia ago, to secure his answer to a question touching on a kind of religious faith; but his *Intimate Poems, Yong-houai che*, the most deeply-personal poetry of the epoch and perhaps of all Chinese literature, permit us to hope for a reply that will be subtle, without being committed to any definite stand.

It must be said, first of all, that we know the very sharply-defined opinions of many of his contemporaries. For the most part, they are negative opinions—easy to give, easy to understand: it's always much simpler to say that one doesn't believe at all than to say that one believes. There were also some writers who strongly believed in the existence of the Immortals, but

they did not analyse their thoughts in this regard as had Jouan Tsi. There was still another widely prevalent attitude at that time: the attitude of Hiang-Sieou in his commentary on the passage of the *Tchouang-tseu* which I have quoted above. For him, stories about Spirit-Men "were only allegories," and he explains them, saying that the sages,

those who went to the bottom of the truth and to the limits of what is marvelous (in the world), knew how to mystically unite themselves with what is beyond the Four Seas, although they were tranquilly and silently (seated) in their sleeping pavilion.

This is a purely intellectual appreciation of these mystical voyages which we understand without trouble. Paul Claudel gives us a striking example of this point of view in his *L'Esprit et l'eau* (written in Peking in 1906), drawn from the second of his *Cinq Grandes Odes*:

Où que je tourne la tête
J'envisage l'immense octave de la Création!
Le monde s'ouvre et, si large qu'en soit l'empam,
mon regard le traverse d'un bout à l'autre.
...d'un bout du monde jusqu'à l'autre...
J'ai tendu l'immense rets de ma connaissance.

[Wherever I turn my head / I envisage the immense scale of Creation! / The world opens and, wide as its span may be, / my glance crosses it from one end to the other. / ...from one end of the world to the other... / I have spread out the immense net of my consciousness.]

Hiang-Sieou's explanation was part of a Confucianist and opportunistic philosophy which didn't please Jouan Tsi at all. In relegating the Immortals to a fictive and mental existence, the followers of this philosophy meant to free themselves from more involved questioning, in order to be able to take part in social life. This was a philosophy of compromise which could not satisfy a man like Jouan Tsi: if the *Biography of Master Great Man* is not sufficient proof of it, we have others much more trenchant. But if this compromise did not satisfy him, he did not go so far as to quite believe in the existence of the Immortals. His attitude is very complex; I can only indicate some aspects of

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it. Here is a poem which seems to be the account of his conversion to the religion of the Taoist Immortals:

Many years ago when I was thirteen or fourteen years old
I loved and respected the Canonical Books of Poetry and History.
I dressed in coarse linen, but I kept the jewels of my Confucianist
virtue in my bosom,
Making myself emulate the wisest disciples of Confucius.
(But one day) I left the capital to enter into nature;
I climbed up on the heights to cast my thoughts afar.
Tombs covered the crests of the mountains
In which ten thousand generations shared a single moment (?).
After a thousand autumns, ten thousand years,
Where is all their glory and renown?

Then I understood the Immortal Sien-men-tseu
And even now, sobbing, I laugh at my own expense!

The sight of the tombs containing the only remains of these heroes of his youth made Jouan Tsi understand that all their virtues and all their wisdom led but to death; the only permanent, and therefore worthy, path was that of Immortals like Sien-men-tseu. While recalling the Confucianist ardor of his youth, he mocks himself—but he mocks himself weeping, perhaps because he did not always feel very close to immortality.

Here is a second, rather characteristic poem:

There is a singular man living in a little city street
Whose carriage is drawn by beautiful brown steeds.
In the morning he rises from the fields of Ying Island;
In the evening he lies down to rest in the luminous Rays.
Twice in his flight like a winged being,
He grazed the outside of the Four Seas!

I am going to put aside the affairs of this world:
I will not allow them to rend my heart!
And once departed I will nevermore return
Except to look at them from afar after a thousand years.

Here again we find a certain ambiguity. The indication that the "singular man" lives in a little street leads one to think that he travels à la Claudel, envisaging the immense scale of creation from his armchair. But Jouan Tsi wishes to depart from the

world for a thousand years—isn't that an indication that he aspired to immortality?

However it may be, in other poems we see that he doesn't manage to entirely believe in the existence of the Immortals. At the same time, these poems indicate that the quest for immortality and the Immortals was so important, as to create in Jouan Tsi a veritable sense of anguish. In a very curious poem, difficult to interpret, he contrasts Immortals like Master Great Man with searchers for immortality such as he saw about him, looking for herbs in the mountains. Here is the poem which I have abridged:

The Immortals put an end to the cultivation of their longevity:
They feed their will in the void.
Flying between the clouds and the sun,
They keep far away from worldly roads.
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(But) endlessly to go on gathering herbs
Does not conform to the will of the divine Immortals.
(This contradiction) has oppressed me and cast me into doubt
And long since has made me hesitate:

The only path leading to the life of the Immortals was by way of long, tedious, dietetic and respiratory exercises: it was more or less necessary to lead the life of a hermit in the mountains and undergo all the discomforts which such a life involved. But the Immortals themselves—the Great Man is a good example—did not bother themselves with such matters. They lived far from the world in space, and Jouan Tsi is oppressed by the doubt which the difference between two modes of life inspires in him.

I will quote a second poem entirely on the same theme:

Formerly the divine Immortals
Lived on the slopes of mount Ye.
They climbed up to the clouds and led flying dragons;
They breathed in and breathed out and nibbled on jade flowers.
Hearing them spoken about and not being able to see them
Makes me moan and sigh with grief.
I suffer because I am not like them,
Which adds still more to my sadness
"I study down here to rise up to the heights",
But I spin around in a ring; I don't know where I go!

A Chinese Conception of the Hero

The phrase "I study down here to rise up to the heights" is from Confucius, and Jouan Tsi employs it in an ambiguous ironical fashion. Confucius (*Louen-yu*, XIV, 37) undoubtedly meant that he was devoting himself to the study of the details of our daily life in order to achieve knowledge of general principles, knowledge of the Mandate of Heaven, as the commentators called it. But the context here obliges us to understand that Jouan Tsi was following these studies in a very down-to-earth fashion, gathering herbs, etc.,—and thus he hopes to attain the height of the Immortals. He still remains, as in his first poem, hesitant and anguished: he lacks Taoist faith!

This ambivalence which Jouan Tsi shows with regard to the Immortals is typical of his entire life. He never could commit himself either to the pursuit of the Long Life, nor to the politics of his time. To tell the truth, he is a figure of historical transition, in a pure state. Dissatisfied with the Confucianism of his time—the philosophy of antiquity, the social and political philosophy—, he turned toward Taoism and the quest for immortality—a medieval philosophy, a personal and religious philosophy. But neither one nor the other seemed to satisfy him. Chinese historians have revealed this discord to us in a brief anecdote. In it we see Jouan Tsi driving his carriage up to the point where the wheel-marks die away on the highway, at the very edge of solitary nature. There he stopped and wept without restraint, and then returned to the society of man. This anecdote is like a symbolic résumé both of his life and his time: China was turning its back on its ancient past, where politics and society, the outward world, remained supreme values; and it was moving toward an interior world symbolized by nature. For it was in nature and, above all, in the mountains, that the Chinese searched for the Immortals.

With all his hesitations, with all his doubting, Jouan Tsi seems sure only of one thing: he had a profound and anguishing need for freedom, or, if you wish, for the Absolute: for some permanence in which he could fully realize himself in all his grandeur as a living man. Master Great Man shows us Jouan Tsi as he fulfills himself in dream, in his literary imagination, as an absolutely free being, as grand as the universe. But his poems reveal to us that he was dubious of truly achieving his

Taoist dreams. In other poems which are like an impossible harmonization of his contradictory desires, he describes himself as a warrior hero whose

Long sword leans on the outside of Heaven;
(A warrior who) grasps mount Tai like a stone to be pointed
And the Yellow River as the girdle for his robe.

His hero earns eternal glory when he falls in some great battle. He is a good Confucianist hero, therefore, because he sacrifices himself for his country—and, by the same token, he is a bad Taoist. Perhaps it is to his very failure of self-fulfillment that we owe the story of Jouan Tsi's dreams and illusions. It is a magnificent story which singularly helps us to plunge ourselves into the heroic and very Chinese world of the Taoist Immortals.