

# The View of Ziran in the Inner Chapter of Baopuzi

Wang Jin<sup>1,\*</sup>, Ding Qun<sup>2</sup>

1.Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100875, China

2.Shandong Foreign Trade Vocational College, Shandong, 266100, China

\*Corresponding Author

**ABSTRACT.** *Ge hong's thought of "ziran" basically extends the meaning of "ziran" in the tao te ching, but in the extension, he pushes the scope of application of "ziran" to a metaphysical world, a physical natural existence and human society. Moreover, he believes that transcendental "ziran" and realistic "ziran" are closely related. People can change or even create realistic "ziran" by grasping transcendental "ziran". His special understanding of "ziran" also provides important examples and theoretical support for his thought of "immortals can be acquired through learning".*

**KEYWORDS:** *Ziran, Baopuzi, Ge hong*

## 1. Introduction

As a famous Taoist in the Jin Dynasty, Ge Hong's thoughts have a tremendous influence. Joseph once called him "the greatest alchemist in Chinese history"<sup>[1]</sup>. Although he was a Taoist, he was not a man of blind faith at that time, but a man with high scientific literacy. As his classic work, *Baopuzi* also embodied this strong scientific nature. Joseph also said that the "earlier chapters of his Pao phu Tsu contained some scientific thinking at what appears to be a high level"<sup>[1]</sup>. Although Ge Hong defined the inner chapter of *Baopuzi* as "saying yellow and white" in author's preface, and later generations usually praised Ge Hong's contribution to the golden elixir thought of Taoism, Ge Hong also focused on another core issue in the inner chapter of *Baopuzi* - "Immortals (*shenxian* 神仙) can be acquired through learning "(shen xian ke yi xue zhi 神仙可以学致)<sup>[2]</sup>, "ziran 自然" is a core concept used by Ge Hong in solving this problem, just as Chen Kewen said "Ge Hong's philosophy of "ziran" is the theoretical basis of his theory of immortals. "<sup>[3]</sup> By analyzing the thought of "ziran" in the inner chapter of *Baopuzi*, on the one hand, we can well understand the main theoretical logic of Ge Hong's thought that "Immortals can be acquired through learning". On the other hand, we can discover the return and development of Lao Tzu's thought through the comparison of Ge Hong's and Lao Tzu 's thought of "ziran".

## 2. The Realistic Extension of “Ziran”

The word “ziran” has appeared 39 times in the inner chapter of Baopuzi, which has different meanings, but its basic meaning is still that nature has meaning, and it extends out irresistible meaning. This interpretation inherits Lao Tzu's basic view of “ziran”, which Luo An xian defined as “rejecting external force and rejecting the interference of ego artificial force”<sup>[4]</sup>, but it further distinguishes the two meanings to “ziran”, which as metaphysical transcendental existence and as phenomenal existence. And we believe that the different understanding of “ziran” can lead to different life attitudes, and different views on the thought that “immortals can be acquired through learning”.

In Baopuzi, the extension of “ziran” in reality is mainly divided into two parts. One part is the nature of modern significance, that is, the nature, which mainly refers to the impersonal natural existence. Ge Hong is often expressed as “Spontaneous” (zi sheng zhe 自生者), “the natural”(zi ran zhe 自然者)and “the natural thing”(zi ran zhi wu 自然之物), which is opposite to the thing created by man. Ge Hong's discussion on these natural things is mostly from the point of view of things created by people through mastering the laws behind things, just like the natural-generated things. There is a special discussion on this point later, so there is not many details here. Among the natural things discussed by Ge Hong, there is a concept that needs special attention, that is, “sky and earth”. When Ge Hong mentioned “sky” and “earth” at the same time in the inner chapter of Baopuzi, he mostly regarded “sky and earth” as the same entity existence as all things from the perspective of objective existence. For example, he thought that “all things feel Qi, and are also natural, and each of them is one thing”(wan wu gan qi, bing yi zi ran, yu bi tian di, ge wei yi wu 萬物感氣,並亦自然,與彼天地,各為一物). The sky and earth here have no mysterious color or power. It's just a kind of natural existence. It's just the environment on which all things live. In this way, the sky and earth are created directly in the sense of “born by the sky, raised by the earth”(tian sheng zhi, di yang zhi 天生之,地養之) by the Confucians in Han Dynasty, and transformed into “depending to exist”(yi sheng 依生) in the sense of conditions. The sky and earth have no dominant significance for people or all things. Man is liberated from the control of heaven and earth. Ge Hong's view of sky and earth, on the one hand, is a positive response to the view that it is up to sky to decide whether or not to become an immortal. He thinks that the domination of immortality is not in sky and earth, which opens an field for people to actively pursue immortality. On the other hand, he thinks that the characteristics of heaven and earth are “greatest”(zhi da 至大), “changing” (bian hua 變化)and “infinite”(wu qiong 無窮), which also provide theoretical possibility for the existence of immortals.

In Baopuzi, ordinary people's understanding of “ziran” mainly stays at the level of phenomenon. They think that many life phenomena, such as birth, aging, sickness, death and so on, are natural and irresistible, so immortals do not exist. As mentioned in the chapter of lunxian 論仙,when discussed about why ordinary people don't want to be immortals, the ordinary people believed that “If a man has a beginning,

he will have a pawn; if he is surviving, he will have a death. Therefore, such as the people, who is as holy as the the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors(sanhuang wudi 三皇五帝),Confucius , Duke of Zhou, and who is as wise as Hou Ji 後稷,Chu lizi 樛裡子,Zhang Liang 張良,Chen Ping 陳平, and who is adept in debating as Dan mucu 端木賜,Yan Ying 晏嬰,Sui He 隨何,Li yiji 酈食其, and who is as brave as Meng Ben 孟賁,Xia Yu 夏育,Wu Ding 五丁,all have died, and this is bound to happen...The ancients learned but did not learn that how to become Immortals,they never talked about weird things,rejected the heresy, and maintained the status quo.” (fu you shi zhe bi you zu, you cun zhe bi you wang. Gu san wu qiu dan zhi sheng, qi ji liang ping zhi zhi, duan ying sui li zhi bian ,ben yu wu ding zhi yong ,er xian si zhe ,ren li zhi chang ran, bi zhi zhi da duan ye...gu gu ren xue bu qiu xian, yan bu yu guai, du bi yi duan, shou ci ziran. 夫有始者必有卒,有存者必有亡.故三五丘旦之聖,棄疾良平之智,端嬰隨酈之辯,賁育五丁之勇,而咸死者,人理之常然,必至之大端也...故古人學不求仙,言不語怪,杜彼異端,守此自然.)” The “ziran” here refers to the phenomenon, which should be “kept”(shou 守), because you can't resist or change it. This kind of attitude seems to be a kind of “inaction”(wuwei 無為)towards “ziran”, but according to Ge Hong, this is not “inaction”, but the “benighted” ( anmei 暗昧)of the mind and the cognition, and it is caused by the lack of understanding of Tao and human beings. This kind of “inaction”, which just “maintain the status quo”(shouziran 守自然), seems that it doesn't pursue the existence, which is out of the natural truth of life, and actively return to the real life, but in fact, it is only clinging to the phenomenon, and can't really return to the essence of life, just because of its biased understanding of “ziran”.

In fact, after the discussion and treatment of the relationship between Confucianism and Taoism by the metaphysics in the early Wei and Jin Dynasties, in Ge Hong's period, the interaction between Confucianism and Taoism was quite prominent. The ordinary people's understanding of “ziran” as mentioned above, has been integrated with the so-called “fate”(ming 命) of Confucianism. In Baopuzi, there has been a saying that “the rich and noble family , which is not short of medical skills, does not have the longer life, so ,life has its own nature ( fu gui zhi jia, qi fa yi shu, er geng bu shou , shi ming you zi ran ye 富貴之家,豈乏醫術,而更不壽,是命有自然也).” It holds that there is an irresistible factor to the length of life, and the irresistible factor is the nature of fate. In this sentence, it uses the “fate” and “ziran” together. In other sentences, there is also the use of ziran zhi ming 自然之命. This kind of understanding of “fate” is closer to the Confucian's view that “life and death are determined by the fate, and wealth and noble are determined by the heaven (sheng si you ming,fu gui zai tian 生死由命,富貴在天 )” (Analects of Confucius ,Yan Yuan) ,which regards fate as an irresistible factor in reality, but is very different from the Tao Te Ching, which regards fate as the essence of life. Because Confucianism's view of “fate” is mostly manifested as an irresistible factor reality, and the early Taoism's “ziran” also has the meaning of being irresistible to follow, and the two connotations are close, so many people use them together. But this kind of integration leads to the misunderstanding of the Taoist view of “ziran”,

which leads to the misunderstanding of shou zi ran 守自然 and wuwei 無為, and that is why the attitude of some people, who seems to believe in the Taoism, changed to the negative exploration of the nature of life and the clinging to the transcendence of the secular.

### 3. The Transcendental Extension of “Ziran”

The transcendental expression of “ziran” is mainly reflected in the law behind the phenomenon of things. Ge Hong often used such words as “the law of ziran (ziran zhi li 自然之理)”, “the way of ziran (ziran zhi dao 自然之道)” “natural instincts (zi ran zhi xing 自然之性)” to express the metaphysical transcendental meaning of “ziran”. These metaphysical laws can be divided into the laws at the level of social phenomena and the laws at the level of objective objects. In Han Dynasty, it was relatively common to use “ziran” to refer to the laws at the level of social phenomena. In Hanshu 漢書, Zhonglun 中論, Lunheng 論衡, etc. they all used “the law of ziran”, “the way of ziran” to express the laws in social phenomena. The use of “ziran” is mainly reflected in Baopuzi · Waipian, and this is not the focus and feature of Ge Hong's “ziran” thought, so it will not be discussed in this paper.

In “Baopuzi · Neipian”, the most distinctive feature is that the objective things have their own unique laws among the extension of metaphysics of “ziran”. Ge Hong's discussion of these laws has gone beyond the discussion of the law of further development and change of superficial phenomena, and even reach the level of the law of the existence and production of things. He believed that the reason of the existence of things, in addition to the Qi 氣 and other material elements, also needs its unique laws. Only the combination of the two can produce things. Moreover, in the existence of things, their laws play a more important role, which at the same time, is natural and unchangeable. Ordinary people may not be able to control the Qi which is an invisible, untouchable and subtle presence. But they can use the realistic existence, which is certainly referred to as a kind of representation of Qi, to create another kind of things or phenomena only if they master the laws through some specific methods. Ge Hong was called “a true Paracelsus one thousand years before the rhapsodical experimentalist of Einsiedeln” by Joseph Needham owing to Ge Hong's deep understanding of the laws. As a positivist with a natural scientific spirit, Ge Hong conducted many experiments which have a strong visual proof effect in breaking people's prejudice on things. To some extent, this indirectly supports the possibility of the existence of immortals.

Those who seek Tao pay more attention to the metaphysical transcendental meaning of “ziran”. Ge Hong usually used the words “the law of ziran”, “the way of ziran”, “natural instincts” and “li ziran 理自然” to express the metaphysical transcendental meaning of “ziran”. The context in which these words are used is when Ge Hong discusses that natural things or phenomena, such as gold, silver, crystal, thunder, rain and snow, can be produced artificially, for example, in the chapter of huangbai 黃白, Ge Hong mentioned that “Artificial gold is as real as nature-being, whether it is from inside or outside, and there would not be any

decrease, no matter how many times it is tempered. According to records, it can be made into nails, if we can find the hard which hidden in it. And only in this way can it be called that you have got the 'the way of ziran' (qie fu zuo jin ze wei zhen wu, Zhong biao ru yi ,bai lian bu jian.gu qi fang yue, ke yi wei ding. Ming qi jian jin ye. Ci ze de fu zi ran zhi dao ye.且夫作金成則為真物,中表如一,百煉不減.故其方曰,可以為釘.明其堅勁也.此則得夫自然之道也.) He believed that the artificial gold, which made after mastering the “way of nature”, was exactly the same as the real gold. But this “the law of ziran “ and “the way of ziran “ are not known by everyone, only the people ,who can “qiong li jin xing 窮理盡性” know this well.

Ge Hong thinks that it is necessary to study and strive for achieving the state of “qiong li jin xing”. He once took Huangdi 黃帝 as an example to illustrate the importance of learning and diligent seeking in the chapter of Jiyan 極言. He thought that Huangdi, the person who gets the natural body from tian 天, can't achieve the dao 道 by just sitting upright “(tian shou zi ran zhi ti zhe ye, you fu bu neng duan zuo er de dao 天授自然之體者也,猶復不能端坐而得道). Even Huangdi tries to achieve the dao through diligent seeking and learning from teachers, and that's just what ordinary people need. Ge Hong's pursuit of learning and diligent attitude towards life seem to be a kind of positive “promising”(youwei, 有為) pursuit, but in fact, it is the “Inaction” that increasingly returns to the essence of life. Ge Hong inherits and develops Lao Tzu's thought of “The student learns by daily increment. The Way is gained by daily loss”<sup>[5]</sup>. He realizes a perfect unity between “The student learns by daily increment.” and “The Way is gained by daily loss “ in the practice of “yang sheng cheng dao”養生成道. With the purpose of learning “the law of ziran” and “the way of ziran”, he “is diligent and continues to study hard “(ji qi gong qin,積其功勤), which seems to be “active”. But in the practice of “yang sheng cheng da 養生成道”, which after learning “the law of ziran” and “the way of ziran”, learning is not the accumulation of knowledge and insight, but the positive return to the nature of life, and it is the study of daily loss. Therefore, it seems to be “promising”, but actually is the “inaction”. This emphasis on “learning” is not specially marked in the Tao Te Ching. After determining the purpose and method of learning, in order to correct the deviation in the understanding of “ziran” and “inaction” after metaphysics in Wei and Jin dynasties, Ge Hong emphasizes the importance of learning for “yang sheng cheng dao”. He proposed that “immortals can be acquired through learning” and even believed that “all ancient immortals were acquired by learning”. In fact, it is a return and play to the thought of “ziran” and “Inaction” in Tao Te Ching.

#### 4. The Relationship between the Two Denotations of “Ziran”

Ge Hong's use of the extension of “ ziran “ is not unintentional, but with profound thinking behind. There is a close relationship between the two connotations of “ziran”. First of all, as for the extension of the two social levels, Ge Hong believes that the extension of metaphysical “ziran” governs that of realistic “ziran”, that is , the idea “the rich and noble family , which is not short of medical

skills, does not have the longer life, so ,life has its own nature” should be replaced by “ frugality brings goodness, no matter on fortune or life”(ming de wei xin,wu you zhe shou,se bao bu yao,duo can yong lao,zi ran zhi li 明德惟馨,無憂者壽,嗇寶不夭,多慘用老,自然之理.)

Therefore, it can be seen that Ge Hong holds the belief that “ziran” should play a directional role in people's life, rather than becomes an accomplice that fixates people's thoughts and makes them refuse to recognize the existence beyond the common sense or the sage's words.

Secondly, in terms of the extension of the two natural existence levels, Ge Hong believes that the two are completely unified. The universal “natural” objective entity, bears and expresses the metaphysical “natural” law. Meanwhile, as long as the metaphysical “natural” law is mastered, the universal “natural” objective entity can be created and changed. To public, the significance of Ge Hong’s discussion of two extension mainly focuses on changing their recognition patterns and world views. But it is not necessary to do so. In Ge Hong’s view, knowing and mastering the “natural laws” embodies exploring thoroughly the logos and the intrinsic character. Ge Hong requests those who cultivate immortality should do this. The discussion of the extension of “ziran” is the most prominent and creative feature of Ge Hong’s view of “ziran”.

From what is mentioned above, it can be found that Ge Hong emphasizes that immortals can be acquired through learning, but he does not request everyone to do it, because he believes it is also determined by “ziran”. This “ziran” is an objective force rather than a god-like being. This force originates from the different influences of celestial bodies upon human beings at birth. Although he believes that people could become immortals, he does not think that immortals have a decisive and dominant power over the world, and immortals are only the spiritual and physical transcendent realm that people could achieve, which is obviously different from the popular Taoism at that time, such as “Five-dou-grain Taoism 五斗米道”. From his attitude towards “ziran”, we can also see that although he advocates that “immortals can be acquired through learning”, it is not a universal requirement for humankind. In his opinion, “immortal” has different meanings to different people. For “mortals”, it means not to be stubborn about what have been seen and heard, but to admit the existence of immortals and the possibility that human can become immortals. For seekers, it is their life goal to be “immortals”. They should strive to become immortals through their own diligent pursuit and the practice of real immortal methods. Overall, the significance of immortals should not lie in the increase of immortals to be worshiped or the increase of the bondage of individual life, other than in self-transcendence of individual life, that is his famous saying “ I am the master of my life”, which means liberating the individual destiny from bondage of Tian and returning to the truth and the “ziran”of life.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, Ge Hong's discussion on the metaphysical meaning of “ziran” is of

great significance. First of all, by mastering the metaphysical “natural principle”, those who seek Tao can produce the original “natural” things or phenomena, so that “mortals” can find their cognitive limitations and ideological errors in a more visual way, which will further help them establish the belief of Dao and “immortals can be acquired through learning”. Secondly, the important theoretical basis of Ge Hong's thought that “taking Jin Dan 金丹 can live forever” is “strengthening my body through external objects (jia qiu yu wai wu yi zi jian gu 假求於外物以自堅固)”, and these examples of the original “natural” things or phenomena can produced by mastering the metaphysical “natural principles”, will effectively provide theoretical and practical support for the benign transformation between “people” and “things”, which Ge Hong called “when Jin Dan gets into our bodies and will mix well with our Rong Wei(jin dan ru shen zhong, zhan qia rong wei 金丹入身中,沾洽榮衛)”. Thirdly, attention to the metaphysical meaning of “ziran” also shows Ge Hong's view of word and cosmology. “Change is the nature of the world(bian hua zhe, nai tian di zhi zi ran 變化者,乃天地之自然)”. In Ge Hong's thought, everything has its own phenomenon, which is the fixation of “you 有”, and this is the particularity of each thing. But behind the phenomenon there is a transcendent existence, which is the flexibility of “wu 無”, and it's the commonality of things. The combination of “you” and “wu” is the essence of things and the world. Ge Hong's focus to the metaphysical meaning of “ziran” makes his understanding of “change” very different with the public. In his opinion, change is not only the change of things themselves, but also the transformation between things. This thought can be regarded as the further exertion of Zhuang Zi's thought of “wuhua 物化”, and also has a great influence on later Taoist thought. For example, Tan Qiao 譚峭, who is the most important Taoist priest in Tang and Five Dynasties period, and also is one of the famous Taoist scholar in the history of Taoism. His book ,which named “the book on the changes” (hua shu 化書), is a further religious expression of Ge Hong's philosophical thought of “change”.

In order to realize the return of the real “ziran” of the people ,the thing and the universe, Ge Hong thinks that people should break through the insistence on the phenomenon,which they called “ziran”, and active pursuit of metaphysical “ziran”, longevity and becoming immortal is the appearance of the real return to “ziran”. This is Ge Hong's overall view of “ziran”, and is also the theoretical logic of his thought that “immortals can be acquired through learning”. Ge Hong believes that “nature” is the unity of metaphysics and phenomenon, which is consistent with his overall philosophy, and this emphasis on “one” is also an important feature of his thought. In terms of understanding the world, he believes that the most fundamental existence of the world is “xuan 玄”, which is the unity of metaphysics and phenomenon; in terms of Kungfu theory, he believes that the most important Kungfu for cultivating immortals is also “shou yi 守一”; in terms of the possibility of becoming immortals, he explains it with the unity of the two meanings of “ziran”. The emphasis and pursuit of “one” should be the return and exertion of the thought of Tao Te Ching's “The secret waits for the insight of eyes unclouded by longing; those who are bound by desire,see only the outward container. These two come

paired but distinct by their names. Of all things profound, say that their pairing is deepest, the gate to the root of the world". And this also supports Thomas Michael's view "in terms of the history of Taoism, Ge Hong should be on the same or close historical position as Lao Tzu. "[6].

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