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Accumulating Virtue to Become Immortal: A Moral Turn Within Daoist Cultivation in the *Taishang Ganying Pian* (Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences)

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Abstract

Early Daoist cultivation is often presented through technical repertoires such as alchemy, ritual, and specialised bodily disciplines, while ethical discourse is treated as preparatory or auxiliary. This article examines how ethical practice could instead function as a sufficient mode of cultivation oriented toward immortality within the Daoist morality books. Focusing on the *Taishang Ganying Pian* 太上感应篇 (Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences), it argues that the tract articulates a coherent cultivational model in which moral conduct is rendered cumulative, intention-sensitive, and enforceable through a bureaucratised system of oversight. Moral deeds are quantified and graded, intentions are treated as morally efficacious prior to action, and both are embedded within a system of registers, inspectors, and periodic assessments that make moral causality predictable. A focused comparison with Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian* 抱朴子内篇 highlights a structural contrast in the ordering of virtue and technique and in the degree of certainty attributed to moral retribution. Tracing the text's reception, the article further shows how this ethical logic was canonised, pedagogically simplified, and socially embedded in later morality texts. It concludes that the *Ganying Pian* established an alternative Daoist pathway in which everyday ethical life itself could function as a practicable route toward immortality.

Keywords: Daoism; *Taishang Ganying Pian*; morality books (*shanshu* 善书); ethical cultivation; *ganying* (action and response); *jishan* (accumulating virtue); immortality



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1. Introduction

Although exhortations toward moral behaviour can already be found in pre-Qin and Han classical texts such as the *Xiaojing*, morality books (*shanshu* 善书) as a distinct and self-conscious genre did not fully emerge until the Song dynasty. The appearance and circulation of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* 太上感应篇 (Tractate of the Most High One on Actions and Consequences) is widely regarded as marking this formal crystallisation (Chen 2023, p. 95). Unlike earlier classical ethical discourse, morality books articulate moral causality in explicitly religious terms and present ethical accumulation as directly connected to cosmic administration and the path to immortality.

The socio-political climate of the Song dynasty provides an important background for understanding this development. Military pressure along the borders, fiscal strain, and the lingering instability following periods of warfare contributed to a heightened sense of moral and existential uncertainty. Within this context, concerns regarding fortune and

misfortune (*jixiong* 吉凶), divine protection, and the predictability of moral consequence acquired renewed urgency. At the same time, the consolidation of Neo-Confucian thought re-configured moral discourse by elevating ethical principles to a cosmological status. Within this broader intellectual and religious environment, Daoists articulated a tract in which the accumulation of virtue was presented not merely as moral exhortation, but as a viable path toward transcendence. As Gang Li (1988, p. 6) notes, the *Ganying Pian* attracted attention not only within Daoist schools but also among Confucian scholars and political authorities, facilitating its wide dissemination.

The *Taishang Ganying Pian* presents itself in the voice of Taishang Laojun (太上老君), thereby grounding its moral injunctions in divine authority rather than human authorship. This mythic attribution functions to elevate the tract beyond ordinary didactic literature and situate it within the theological horizon of Daoism. As for its historical authorship, no definitive conclusion has been reached. The text is generally considered anonymous. The Northern Song Confucian scholar Li Chang-ling (李昌齡) is known to have composed one of the earliest commentaries (Chen 2023, p. 95), and some scholars have attributed authorship to him (Gang Li 1988, p. 6), though such claims remain debated. What can be established with relative certainty is that the text was in circulation no later than 1118 CE, placing its formation within the Northern Song period rather than the Southern Song as sometimes suggested (J. Li 2017).

The tract draws upon earlier Daoist materials and shares thematic continuities with texts such as the *Baopuzi Neipian* 抱朴子内篇, particularly in its treatment of moral retribution and lifespan calculations. However, rather than serving as a simple compilation, the *Ganying Pian* reorganises these elements within a concise and didactic framework characteristic of emerging morality literature. It is within this genre-specific configuration that ethical accumulation is articulated as a practicable mode of cultivation. Within this corpus, transcendence is pursued not through esoteric expertise but through ordinary conduct, social beneficence, and the rectification of intention.

Early Daoist cultivation is conventionally understood as grounded in technical and esoteric repertoires—alchemy, talismans, ritual procedures, and specialised bodily disciplines—through which immortality is imagined as the result of mastery over hidden methods rather than the gradual accumulation of virtue. Against this background, the morality books raise a distinctive question: how can a Daoist model of cultivation that retains a distinctly Daoist cosmology render ethical practice sufficient—rather than merely auxiliary—as a path toward immortality?

This article addresses that question through a focused study of the *Taishang Ganying Pian*. Rather than approaching the tract as a loose collection of moral injunctions, I read it as a compact and internally coherent model of cultivation. The text specifies a quantifiable programme of virtue accumulation, extends moral accountability to thoughts as well as deeds, and operationalises *ganying* 感应 (“action and response”) through an administrative cosmology of registers, inspectors, and periodic audits. In this configuration, moral life is not an external supplement to Daoist practice; it becomes the very means through which transcendence is rendered accessible to non-specialists.

Much existing scholarship situates the *Ganying Pian* within a framework of Confucian–Daoist convergence and emphasises its social and pedagogical functions (Guoping Li 2023; Gang Li 1988; T. Liu 2017). While such interpretations illuminate important aspects of its reception, they leave underexplored a more specific structural question: how the path of “accumulating virtue to attain immortality” is rendered viable within a distinctly Daoist cosmological framework. It is this structural question that the present article seeks to clarify.

A limited comparison with Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (c. 283–343 CE) *Baopuzi Neipian* helps specify what is distinctive in the *Ganying Pian* without positing a sweeping, tradition-wide

rupture. In Ge Hong's account, ethical conduct is strongly recommended but functions primarily as a condition that stabilises or safeguards a fundamentally technical pursuit of longevity (Ge 1985). The *Ganying Pian*, by contrast, reorganises virtue accumulation into a cumulative and enforceable system capable of sustaining cultivation in its own right. The comparison is analytic rather than developmental: it highlights a difference in how virtue and technique are ordered within two influential Daoist configurations of practice.

This article does not argue that Daoist cultivation as a whole abandoned ritual, bodily discipline, or technical repertoires. Rather, it examines how one influential tract—and the morality-text tradition it helped consolidate—reconfigured the relationship between immortality, ethics, and cosmology. Methodologically, the study combines historical-philological attention to key terms with a structural reading of the tract's injunctions and prohibitions. Section 2 analyses the internal cultivational logic of *Ganying Pian*, including moral quantification, intention-sensitivity, and administrative cosmology. Section 3 offers a focused comparison with the *Baopuzi Neipian* to clarify the differing ordering of virtue and technique. Section 4 examines the reception and diffusion of this ethical model in later morality texts. The conclusion returns to the initial question and argues that the *Ganying Pian* stabilised an alternative pathway in which everyday ethical life could function as a practicable route toward immortality while remaining grounded in a distinctly Daoist cosmology.

The English translations of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* cited in this article are based on the translation by David K. Jordan. Jordan, a cultural anthropologist known for his work on Chinese religion and sectarian traditions, prepared this translation for instructional purposes and made it publicly available. Owing to its accessibility, clear structure, and inclusion of both Chinese text and romanisation, Jordan's version has become one of the most widely consulted English translations of the text in contemporary academic and pedagogical contexts. Unless otherwise indicated, translations in this article follow Jordan (n.d.), with minor adjustments where necessary. All other translations of Chinese texts cited in this article, including passages from the *Baopuzi* and related sources, are the author's own unless otherwise specified.

2. The Taishang Ganying Pian as a Moral Model of Cultivation

Western scholarship has long noted that morality texts operate through systems of merit and demerit that assign numerical value to ethical conduct. Cynthia Brokaw's study of merit-demerit ledgers, for example, demonstrates how such texts enabled practitioners to record, calculate, and strategically plan their moral behaviour within a framework of supernatural retribution (Brokaw 1996). In this model, moral action becomes measurable, cumulative, and administratively intelligible. Yet while this calculative dimension has been analysed primarily in relation to moral self-regulation and popular religious practice, its implications for Daoist cultivation have received comparatively less sustained attention. The *Taishang Ganying Pian* not only presupposes such a merit economy but also integrates it into a cosmology explicitly oriented toward life extension and immortal attainment. It is this structural integration that the following analysis seeks to clarify. The internal logic of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* can be reconstructed along three closely connected dimensions: the quantification of moral action and cumulative thresholds for immortal attainment, the moral efficacy of intention, and the administrative cosmology that renders ethical accountability predictable and enforceable.

Rather than approaching the *Taishang Ganying Pian* as a loose collection of ethical injunctions, this section reads the tract as a compact and internally coherent model of Daoist cultivation. The text does not merely exhort its audience to "do good"; it specifies how moral conduct is converted into efficacy oriented toward immortal attainment through a structured economy of merit, intention, and cosmic oversight. In this sense, the *Ganying*

Pian articulates a moral model of cultivation: a programme in which ethical practice is sufficient to orient the practitioner toward transcendence, without recourse to technical mastery of alchemical or ritual procedures.

This claim of sufficiency becomes particularly clear when the *Ganying Pian* is read alongside Ge Hong's formulation in the *Baopuzi Neipian*. Ge Hong explicitly acknowledges the efficacy of ethical conduct, yet carefully limits its scope: "If one does not consume immortal elixirs but performs good deeds, although one may not yet achieve immortality, one can avoid sudden death" (Ge 1985, vol. 3, p. 54) (若不服仙药, 并行好事。雖未便得仙, 亦可無卒死之禍矣). Ethical practice here may avert misfortune, but it cannot, by itself, lead to immortality. By contrast, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* repeatedly affirms that sustained moral practice, when accumulated to a sufficient degree, is capable of culminating in immortal attainment: "When a person is known as virtuous, people all praise him. Heaven's Way protects him, happiness and wealth follow him, All evil forces stay away from him; gods guard him. Whatever he does is successful, and he can aspire to join the gods and immortals". (Jordan n.d., chap. 3) (所谓善人, 人皆敬之, 天道佑之, 福祿随之, 所作必成, 神仙可翼).

Three interlocking features organise this cultivation model. First, the tract establishes a quantified ethic of accumulation, defining graded thresholds of merit (e.g., counts of good deeds) that correspond to differentiated graded outcomes of immortal attainment. Second, it advances an intention-sensitive moral psychology, according to which thoughts and inclinations are morally operative even prior to action. Third, it embeds both conduct and intention within a bureaucratised cosmology of moral oversight, populated by registers, inspectors, and periodic audits that render moral causality predictable and enforceable. Taken together, these features transform everyday behaviour—within the household, the marketplace, social relations, and the natural environment—into the primary medium of cultivation.

The analysis that follows proceeds from this internal structure. Before introducing comparative materials, it examines how the *Ganying Pian* constructs moral agency, distributes responsibility across action and intention, and operationalises *ganying* 感应 (action and response) as a mechanism that links human conduct to cosmic response.

2.1. Quantifying Moral Action and Graded Paths to Immortality

In the *Taishang Ganying Pian*, ethical cultivation is rendered legible through a quantified moral economy in which the accumulation of good deeds functions as the primary metric for progress toward immortality. Within this framework, good deeds are enumerated, differentiated, and accumulated, allowing moral practice to be conceptualised as a long-term, incremental process rather than an indeterminate moral disposition. The tract's emphasis on numerical accumulation prepares the ground for explicit benchmarks of moral sufficiency. Although the numerical figures in classical Chinese texts should not be interpreted as arithmetically precise according to their expressive conventions, we can still comprehend the quantitative relationships within the framework of these symbolic representations.

Within this schematic framework, the text consistently treats both virtue and transgression as quantifiable moral data: good deeds are accumulated toward normative benchmarks of sufficiency, while immoral actions are likewise recorded and aggregated as measurable moral deficits. This logic is articulated most clearly in passages that align moral speech, intention, and action with cumulative temporal consequences: "Therefore a joyous man speaks what is good, thinks what is good, and does what is good; each day he does these three things, and in three years Heaven will bequeath to him good fortune. But an unlucky man is he who speaks what is evil, thinks what is evil, and does what is evil; each day he does these three things, and in three years Heaven will strike him with misfortune."

(Jordan n.d., chap. 6) (故吉人语善、视善、行善，一日有三善，三年天必降之福。凶人语恶、视恶、行恶，一日有三恶，三年天必降之祸。胡不勉而行之？)

The tract further differentiates levels of immortals through conventionalised numerical thresholds. It states, for example, that “He who would become a heavenly immortal must perform thirteen hundred good deeds. He who would become an earthly immortal must perform three hundred good deeds.” (Jordan n.d., chap. 3) (欲求天仙者，当立一千三百善；欲求地仙者，当立三百善).

Correspondingly, the *Ganying Pian* also specifies that different levels of evil are subject to correspondingly graded quantitative punishments.

凡人有过，大则夺纪，小则夺算。

For ordinary people offenses cut off a jì (12 years) if great, while small offenses cut off a suàn (100 days)¹. (Jordan n.d., chap. 1)

These figures may not function as arithmetical absolutes, but as culturally intelligible markers through which accumulated merit is rendered comparable and hierarchically ordered, with more extensive accumulation oriented toward higher forms of transcendence. This framework structurally privileges continuous accumulation over episodic moral achievement, orienting ethical practice toward open-ended progression rather than completion.

By rendering moral conduct legible in cumulative and schematic terms, the *Ganying Pian* transforms everyday ethical behaviour into a continuous practice of cultivation.

2.2. Intention and Moral Efficacy

Beyond the quantification of external conduct, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* extends moral accountability into the domain of intention, treating thoughts and inclinations as morally efficacious prior to action. Within this framework, ethical evaluation does not depend solely on observable behaviour; inner dispositions are themselves subject to moral assessment and cosmic response. The text repeatedly emphasises that consequences are triggered not only by what one does but also by what one thinks and intends, even when no outward action follows.

By rendering intention morally operative, the *Ganying Pian* internalises ethical cultivation and collapses the distance between inner orientation and external consequence, transforming moral vigilance into a continuous, inwardly sustained practice.

夫心起于善，善虽未为，而吉神已随之。或心起于恶，恶虽未为，而凶神已随之。

When a person's heart is moved by goodness, although the goodness has not yet been achieved, nevertheless felicitous spirits are already following him. But when a person's heart is moved by evil, although the evil has not yet been achieved, nevertheless spirits of misfortune are already following him. (Jordan n.d., chap. 6)

This emphasis is reinforced by passages that align the arising of benevolent or malicious thoughts with immediate moral response, suggesting that intention itself constitutes a consequential event within the tract's ethical economy.

The moral efficacy of intention also enables a dynamic logic of correction. Because inner dispositions are continuously monitored, they are likewise open to recognition and reform. Moral cultivation, in this sense, is not structured as an irreversible accumulation of guilt but as an ongoing process of vigilance in which intention remains subject to adjustment.

其有曾行恶事，后自改悔，诸恶莫作，众善奉行，久久必获吉庆，所谓转祸为福也。

A person who formerly did bad things but afterward repents and does no more evil, and continues in good behavior, then gradually he must obtain good fortune

and happiness. This is called “changing disaster into good fortune.” (Jordan n.d., chap. 6)

By extending moral accountability into the realm of intention, the *Ganying Pian* renders ethical cultivation continuously evaluable, thereby necessitating a cosmological apparatus capable of registering and responding to inner moral states.

2.3. Cosmic Administration and Moral Accountability

For moral conduct and intention to remain continuously evaluable, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* presupposes a cosmological framework capable of registration and response. A striking feature of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* is that it introduces a system of moral surveillance at the very beginning of the text, prior to any detailed enumeration of virtues or prohibitions. The moralised conception of Heaven and the celestial administrative system of “the Perfected” are embedded in the traditions of Chinese religion, originating from early sacrificial practices and explicitly inherited and developed by Daoism (Lagerwey 2018, pp. 23–24, 100). The tract foregrounds concrete agents responsible for observing, recording, and reporting human conduct. It opens by asserting that “heaven and earth have spirits who record crimes” (Jordan n.d., chap. 1) (天地有司过之神) and immediately elaborates this claim by specifying multiple supervisory figures operating at different levels and intervals.

These supervising agents are described with notable institutional clarity and together constitute a system of moral oversight that is both temporally continuous and spatially comprehensive. From a temporal perspective, the Santai Beidou Shenjun 三台北斗神君 are presented as exercising constant supervision, residing above the human head, and continuously recording moral offences and subtracting units of lifespan. Their role establishes an always-on horizon of moral accountability that frames ethical conduct as permanently observable.

The presence of the Santai Beidou Shenjun in the *Ganying Pian* is not incidental. Both the *Santai* and the *Beidou* refer to stellar configurations associated with the Northern Dipper, whose religious significance in Chinese cosmology predates the formation of institutional Daoism. By the pre-Qin and Han periods, the *Beidou* was already associated with the regulation of cosmic order and the determination of life and death. The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 records that the Northern Dipper demonstrates the alternation of *yin* and *yang* and thereby participates in the waxing and waning of life (A. Liu 1989, p. 204). In the Eastern Han Daoist text *Laozi Zhongjing* 老子中经, the Beidou Shenjun is explicitly described as recording human lifespan and destiny (Schipper and Verellen 2004, p. 92).

By the Wei–Jin period, as the Daoist celestial bureaucracy became increasingly systematised, the *Beidou* was progressively personified and integrated into a structured pantheon. The well-known formulation “the Southern Dipper governs birth, the Northern Dipper governs death” crystallised into a cosmological framework in which stellar deities were understood as administrators of life registers. Texts such as Gan Bao’s *Soushen Ji* 搜神记 preserve narratives in which life allotment is calculated and altered through celestial intervention (Gan 1979, pp. 33–34). Within this evolving tradition, the Santai—three paired stellar groupings adjacent to the Northern Dipper—came to be associated with supervision over human lifespan and moral record (Chen 2023, p. 105).

Seen against this background, the *Ganying Pian*’s invocation of the Santai Beidou Shenjun represents not an isolated symbolic gesture but the mobilisation of an already established cosmological system linking stellar administration to human longevity. While different texts and commentarial traditions vary in their numerical specifications, what is structurally significant is the translation of moral conduct into calculable life-span consequence. Earlier sources, such as the *Huainanzi*, articulate a qualitative correlation between cosmic order and human life; by contrast, the morality books’ framework renders this rela-

tionship increasingly quantifiable. Such quantification renders the accumulation of virtue structurally capable of altering life registers and extending one's lifespan.

Moreover, the recurrent image of these stellar officials positioned above the human head reinforces the notion of continuous celestial supervision. Moral accounting in the *Ganying Pian* thus depends upon an established Daoist cosmology in which divine administrators record conduct and adjust life registers accordingly. The tract does not invent this bureaucratic universe; rather, it activates and systematises it in order to render ethical accumulation institutionally credible and religiously effective.

Alongside this continuous supervision, the tract introduces periodic mechanisms of reporting. The *Sanshishen* 三尸神, designated within the human body, are tasked with ascending to the celestial administration on fixed calendrical days to submit reports of moral transgressions, while household deities are described as filing regular accounts at the close of each month. These recurring moments of review punctuate moral life with institutionalised checkpoints, ensuring that ethical conduct is not only observed but also formally registered at defined intervals.

The notion of the *Sanshishen*, however, is not an innovation of the *Ganying Pian* but derives from an already established Daoist cosmology as well. References to the "Three Corpses" (*san shi* 三尸) can be traced to early traditions; the *Han Wudi Neizhuan* 汉武帝内传 records that Emperor Wu of Han was prevented from attaining immortality because the Three Corpses within his body disrupted his cultivation (Ban 1999, p. 144). By the time of Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian*, the Three Corpses are explicitly described as reporting human transgressions and thereby affecting life span calculations (Ge 1985, vol. 6, p. 125). The *Ganying Pian*, therefore, does not invent this internal surveillance mechanism but incorporates an already mature religious concept into its structured system of moral registration.

The text further reinforces this temporal structure by emphasising the daily accumulation of moral action, aligning everyday conduct with cumulative consequence and moral response.

From a spatial perspective, this system of oversight extends across multiple domains of human life. Moral conduct is monitored within the internal space of the body through the *Sanshishen*, within the domestic sphere through household deities, and across the broader social and public realm under the constant supervision of the *Santai Beidou Shenjun*. Taken together, these overlapping temporal and spatial dimensions produce a densely layered framework of moral accountability in which conduct and intention are continuously exposed to evaluation. Within such a system, ethical life unfolds under conditions of comprehensive supervision, providing the institutional foundation upon which moral cultivation can plausibly operate as a sustained path toward immortality.

What is especially significant is that this supervisory framework is not introduced as a supplementary explanation of moral retribution but as a foundational premise of the tract's ethical universe. By placing the apparatus of observation and reporting at the outset, the *Ganying Pian* establishes moral accountability as an institutional condition that precedes specific moral injunctions. Ethical cultivation thus unfolds within a world already saturated by mechanisms of registration and oversight, in which conduct and intention are never private or episodic but permanently exposed to evaluation. Only within such a system of supervision can the quantification and recordability of good and evil become meaningful and constitute a practicable path to immortality.

Although the tract devotes considerable attention to the registration and reporting of moral transgressions, this emphasis should not be read as implying a purely punitive moral cosmos. The predominance of supervising deities who record offences reflects the tract's pedagogical concern with deterrence and moral vigilance, rather than a structural in-

difference to virtuous conduct. Indeed, the text explicitly affirms that benevolent thoughts and actions generate immediate moral effects.

夫心起于善，善虽未为，而吉神已随之。

When a person's heart is moved by goodness, although the goodness has not yet been achieved, nevertheless felicitous spirits are already following him. (Jordan n.d., chap. 6)

When a benevolent intention arises, auspicious forces are said to respond even before such intentions are enacted; conversely, malicious thoughts trigger adverse responses at the moment of their emergence.

Crucially, the tract further maintains that moral trajectories remain reversible. Those who previously engaged in wrongdoing may, through sustained repentance and renewed commitment to virtuous conduct, gradually “changing disaster into good fortune” (Jordan n.d.). Within this framework, virtuous intention and action are not merely tolerated in the absence of transgression; they are continuously operative, accumulating moral efficacy from the moment they arise and constituting the very conditions under which the pursuit of immortality remains possible. The apparent asymmetry between the detailed recording of offences and the less formalised accounting of virtue thus reflects a difference in narrative emphasis rather than in institutional logic.

The foregoing analysis has reconstructed the *Taishang Ganying Pian* as an internally coherent model of cultivation, in which ethical conduct operates through quantification, intention-sensitivity, and institutional enforcement. Taken on its own terms, the tract presents a self-sufficient framework by which everyday moral practice can plausibly sustain the pursuit of immortality.

Yet, this internal coherence raises a further analytical question: What precisely distinguishes this configuration from earlier Daoist models in which virtue and technique were ordered differently? Addressing this question requires moving beyond internal reconstruction to a focused structural comparison. The following section, therefore, situates the *Ganying Pian* alongside Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian*, not to narrate a comprehensive doctrinal shift within Daoism but to clarify how two influential texts assign divergent roles to ethical conduct within their respective configurations of cultivation.

3. Virtue and Technique in Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian*: A Structural Comparison

To clarify what is distinctive about the moral logic of cultivation articulated in the *Taishang Ganying Pian*, it is necessary to situate it against earlier Daoist models in which ethical conduct occupied a different structural position within the pursuit of immortality. This section offers a focused comparison with Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian*, a foundational text of early medieval Daoist cultivation discourse.

The comparison undertaken here is grounded not merely in thematic resemblance but in demonstrable textual proximity. The *Taishang Ganying Pian* incorporates and reconfigures formulations concerning lifespan calculation, moral subtraction, and the regulation of longevity that are already articulated in Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian* (Chen 2023, pp. 145–46). The present analysis, therefore, compares not two unrelated doctrinal systems separated by centuries but two configurations in which overlapping textual materials are assigned different structural roles within cultivation.

In the *Baopuzi Neipian*, moral conduct is repeatedly affirmed as indispensable, yet it functions primarily as a condition that stabilises and safeguards technical practice, rather than as a cumulative path toward immortality in its own right. By contrast, as demonstrated in the preceding sections, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* reorganises ethical practice into

a quantifiable, intention-sensitive, and institutionally enforced system capable of supporting the pursuit of immortality without recourse to specialised techniques. The comparison thus highlights not historical development in a linear sense, but functional recontextualisation and structural reordering within Daoist discourse. Reading these two texts side by side thus allows us to clarify the specificity of the *Ganying Pian*: not the emergence of morality per se, but the reconfiguration of ethical conduct from a prerequisite of cultivation into a practicable mode of cultivation itself.

3.1. Situating the *Baopuzi Neipian* Within Daoist Cultivation Discourse

Before turning to a detailed comparison, it is necessary to situate the *Baopuzi Neipian* within the broader landscape of Daoist cultivation discourse. Composed in the early medieval period, the text is explicitly concerned with demonstrating the reality and attainability of immortality and with specifying the means by which such attainment may be achieved. Its primary aim is neither moral instruction nor social pedagogy, but the defence and explication of technical practices—most notably alchemical methods—that promise longevity and transcendence.

Within this framework, Ge Hong presents Daoist cultivation as a demanding and specialised endeavour. The *Neipian* repeatedly emphasises the efficacy of external techniques, particularly the ingestion of elixirs, as the decisive factor in overcoming mortality. Alchemical substances are described as possessing transformative properties capable of refining the human body and rendering it imperishable. Ethical conduct, while strongly recommended, is not presented as a self-sufficient path to immortality but as one component within a broader regimen oriented toward technical mastery.

夫五谷犹能活人，人得之则生，绝之则死，又况于上品之神药，其益人岂不万倍于五谷耶？夫金丹之为物，烧之愈久，变化愈妙。黄金入火，百炼不消，埋之，毕天不朽。服此二物，炼人身体，故能令人不老不死。此盖假求外物以自坚固

Even the five grains can sustain life; if one obtains them, one lives, but without them, one dies. How much more so with the divine medicines of the highest grade? Their benefits to humans are surely ten thousand times greater than those of the five grains. Gold, when placed in fire, remains unchanged even after a hundred refinings; when buried, it does not decay for eternity. Consuming these two substances refines the human body, enabling one to avoid ageing and death. This is how we seek external substances to strengthen ourselves. (Ge 1985, vol. 3, p. 71)

The intended audience of the *Baopuzi Neipian* further clarifies this orientation. The text presupposes access to esoteric knowledge, material resources, and sustained commitment to disciplined practice. It addresses readers who aspire to immortality through specialised training rather than just through the regulation of everyday moral conduct. Moral behaviour, accordingly, is framed in terms of its capacity to stabilise the practitioner's circumstances, avert divine displeasure, and preserve the conditions necessary for technical cultivation, rather than as a cumulative practice capable of effecting transcendence on its own.

Situating the *Baopuzi Neipian* in this way helps to clarify the structural logic governing its treatment of virtue and technique. Ethical conduct is neither marginal nor dispensable; rather, it is positioned within a hierarchy in which technical practice remains decisive. This configuration provides the necessary point of contrast for understanding the distinctive reordering of ethical practice articulated in the *Taishang Ganying Pian*, to which the following sections now turn.

3.2. The Function of Moral Conduct in the Two Classics

In the *Baopuzi Neipian*, moral conduct occupies an important yet structurally limited position within the pursuit of immortality. Ge Hong repeatedly affirms the necessity of ethical behaviour, particularly in relation to social responsibility, ritual propriety, and restraint of harmful actions. However, this emphasis does not elevate virtue into an independent or cumulative path of cultivation. Rather, moral conduct functions primarily as a stabilising condition that preserves the practitioner's circumstances and safeguards the possibility of technical practice.

This functional limitation is articulated with notable clarity in Ge Hong's own formulation:

若不服仙药，并行好事，雖未便得仙，亦可無卒死之祸矣

If one does not consume immortal elixirs but performs good deeds, although one may not achieve immortality, one can avoid sudden death. (Ge, 1985, vol. 3, p. 54)

Here, ethical action is explicitly acknowledged as efficacious, yet its efficacy is carefully circumscribed. Moral conduct may avert premature misfortune and maintain worldly stability, but it does not, by itself, orient the practitioner toward immortality. The path to transcendence remains decisively dependent on technical means.

This passage is revealing not because it downplays the value of morality, but because it defines its scope. Ethical behaviour is presented as necessary for avoiding disruption—whether social, karmic, or cosmological—that might impede cultivation. It secures favourable conditions under which alchemical practice may proceed, but it does not accumulate toward a transformative threshold capable of overcoming mortality on its own. In this sense, virtue operates as a protective and preparatory measure rather than as a mode of cultivation with its own internal logic of progression.

Such a configuration differs fundamentally from the model articulated in the *Taishang Ganying Pian*. Whereas the latter renders moral practice cumulative, quantifiable, and directly oriented toward graded forms of immortal attainment, the *Baopuzi Neipian* maintains a clear hierarchy in which technical practice remains decisive. Ethical conduct, though indispensable, is structurally subordinated to technique and lacks the institutional mechanisms that would allow it to function as an autonomous path of cultivation. This distinction is not a matter of moral valuation but of how virtue is operationalised within the respective logics of practice.

3.3. Moral Retribution and the Degree of Certainty

A further point of divergence between the *Baopuzi Neipian* and the *Taishang Ganying Pian* concerns the degree of certainty attributed to moral retribution. While both texts acknowledge a connection between ethical conduct and cosmic consequence, they differ markedly in how reliably this connection is understood to operate and, consequently, in whether it can sustain a stable mode of cultivation.

In the *Baopuzi Neipian*, Ge Hong discusses the possibility that moral transgressions may result in reductions of lifespan through the subtraction of *ji* 紀 or *suan* 算. Yet he explicitly refrains from affirming the certainty of this mechanism. As he states, “Major offences reduce one's *ji*... minor offences reduce one's *suan*...yet I myself have not been able to ascertain whether such matters truly exist” (Ge 1985, vol. 6, p. 125) (大者夺纪...小者夺算...吾亦未能审此事之有无也). Even where moral causality is entertained, it is accompanied by epistemic hesitation. Ge Hong further cautions that, given the vastness of Heaven and Earth and the obscurity of spirits, moral response need not occur with immediacy or regularity: retribution does not necessarily “respond mechanically and instantaneously” (不必机发而响应耳).

This stance has important structural implications. Because moral retribution is treated as contingent rather than predictable, ethical conduct in the *Baopuzi Neipian* cannot be integrated into a stable rhythm of cultivation. Moral action may avert misfortune, delay calamity, or preserve favourable conditions for practice, but it does not operate within a system of regular assessment or guaranteed response. The practitioner cannot rely on ethical behaviour to produce determinate outcomes within a calculable timeframe. As a result, moral conduct remains functionally supportive rather than generative: it safeguards the practitioner's circumstances but does not itself constitute a dependable pathway toward transcendence.

By contrast, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* consistently frames moral retribution as certain, timely, and institutionally enforced. As shown in Section 2.3, the tract embeds ethical conduct within an administrative cosmology populated by supervising deities, moral registers, and periodic audits. Moral causality is not left to the vagaries of distant Heaven or inscrutable spirits but is rendered systematic through mechanisms of daily accumulation, cyclical reporting, and graduated reward and punishment. The repeated insistence that Heaven “will certainly bestow blessings” or “will certainly bring calamity” (必降之福/必降之祸) transforms moral retribution from a speculative possibility into a reliable principle governing everyday conduct.

This difference in certainty is decisive for the role ethical practice can play within each model of cultivation. In the *Baopuzi Neipian*, the indeterminacy of moral response prevents ethical conduct from functioning as an autonomous or cumulative mode of practice. Without predictable feedback, morality cannot generate a sustained discipline oriented toward immortal attainment. In the *Taishang Ganying Pian*, however, the certainty of moral response allows ethical action and intention to be organised into a continuous practice. Because conduct is reliably registered and consequences are systematically distributed, moral cultivation acquires temporal structure, motivational force, and practical coherence.

The contrast, therefore, does not lie in whether moral retribution is acknowledged, but in how it is operationalised. The *Baopuzi Neipian* preserves a cautious and non-institutional understanding of moral causality, consistent with a model in which technical practice remains decisive. The *Taishang Ganying Pian*, by contrast, transforms ethical causality into a predictable and enforceable framework, thereby enabling moral practice to function as a practicable path of cultivation in its own right. This difference in the degree of certainty assigned to moral retribution completes the structural contrast between the two texts and clarifies why ethical practice occupies such divergent positions within their respective configurations of cultivation.

Taken together, the comparison with the *Baopuzi Neipian* clarifies that the distinctiveness of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* does not lie in the mere presence of moral discourse but in the structural role assigned to ethical practice within cultivation. In Ge Hong's model, moral conduct is indispensable yet functionally limited: it stabilises the practitioner's circumstances and prevents disruption, while technical practice remains decisive for overcoming mortality. The indeterminacy surrounding moral retribution further constrains virtue from operating as a cumulative or self-sustaining mode of practice.

By contrast, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* reorganises ethical conduct into a quantifiable, intention-sensitive, and institutionally enforced framework. Moral action and intention are embedded within a predictable system of registration, periodic assessment, and graded consequence, enabling ethical practice to function as a continuous and practicable path toward immortal attainment. The contrast between the two texts thus concerns not moral valuation but the ordering of virtue and technique and the degree of certainty attributed to moral causality.

This structural divergence underscores the specificity of the *Ganying Pian* without implying that Daoist cultivation as a whole underwent a uniform or immediate reconfiguration. Rather, it highlights how one influential tract articulated a model in which everyday ethical conduct could plausibly sustain cultivation in the absence of specialised techniques, thereby expanding the practical accessibility of Daoist paths to immortality.

4. From Tract to Tradition: The Diffusion of Ethical Cultivation After the *Ganying Pian*

The analysis so far has established that the *Taishang Ganying Pian* articulates a coherent model in which ethical conduct is rendered capable of sustaining cultivation toward immortality. This section turns from internal structure and textual comparison to historical reception, asking how this model functioned beyond the confines of a single tract. Rather than attempting a comprehensive history of Daoist morality texts, the discussion that follows traces how the ethical logic articulated in the *Ganying Pian* was taken up, reproduced, and stabilised in later religious and social contexts.

The aim here is not to argue that Daoist cultivation as a whole was redefined through morality texts, nor to suggest a uniform transformation across the tradition. Instead, this section demonstrates that the *Ganying Pian* provided a reproducible framework—one that could be transmitted, simplified, and adapted—through which ethical practice was widely recognised as a viable path of cultivation. The subsequent diffusion of this model helps explain why the ethical logic analysed in Sections 2 and 3 did not remain a singular textual experiment; rather, it became a persistent and influential mode of religious practice.

4.1. Canonisation and Public Authority

Shortly after its circulation, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* attracted sustained attention not only within Daoist communities but also across broader intellectual and political spheres. Its rapid elevation from a didactic tract to a widely endorsed moral manual played a significant role in consolidating its authority and facilitating the diffusion of its ethical model. Imperial patronage, Confucian endorsement, and Daoist advocacy together transformed the text into a normative reference for moral instruction, extending its influence well beyond narrowly religious contexts.

The earliest recorded promoters of the *Ganying Pian* include leading Daoist figures of the late Northern Song period. The 30th *tian shi* 天师 (Celestial Master), Zhang Jixian 張继先 (1092–1126 CE), is among the first known religious authorities to publicly commend the text, signalling its acceptance within institutional Daoism. This early recognition was soon reinforced by political authority. During the Southern Song, Emperor Lizong Zhao Yun 南宋理宗赵昀 (1205–1264 CE) ordered the text to be printed at state expense and bestowed upon it the imperial inscription of a moral teaching of the tract, placing it at the forefront of officially sanctioned moral education. Through this act, the *Ganying Pian* was explicitly positioned as a foundational instrument of social instruction rather than as a sectarian Daoist scripture. Imperial endorsement continued into later dynasties. Emperor Shizong of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Houcong 朱厚熜 (1507–1567 CE, also widely known by his era name as the Jiajing Emperor), praised the text for its capacity to “support the Confucian classics and supplement royal governance,” while the Qing court ordered its circulation among officials and examination candidates (Chen 2023, p. 95). Such measures indicate that the *Ganying Pian* was valued not merely for its religious content, but for its perceived efficacy in shaping moral conduct at the level of society. Ethical cultivation, as articulated in the text, thus acquired a degree of political legitimacy that enabled its widespread dissemination.

Equally significant was the text's reception among Confucian literati. The Southern Song scholar Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178–1235 CE) authored an influential preface in which he explicitly compared the *Ganying Pian* to Confucian and Buddhist moral texts. While acknowledging the pedagogical value of works such as the *Daxue* 大学 and Buddhist sutra commentaries, Zhen argued that these texts were either too specialised or too abstruse for ordinary people. By contrast, the *Ganying Pian*, with its direct exposition of moral cause and effect, was praised for its clarity, accessibility, and capacity to “awaken conscience” among common readers (Zhen 2016). This literati endorsement was crucial in framing the text as a universally applicable moral guide rather than a narrowly religious work.

Through the combined force of Daoist advocacy, imperial patronage, and Confucian endorsement, the *Taishang Ganying Pian* acquired an authority that transcended sectarian boundaries. Its ethical model—centred on the accumulation of virtue, the certainty of moral response, and the accessibility of cultivation through everyday conduct—was thereby institutionalised as a legitimate and teachable path. This process of canonisation laid the foundation for the extensive reproduction, commentary, and adaptation of the text in later morality-book traditions, to which the following sections now turn.

Through these overlapping forms of endorsement, the *Ganying Pian* acquired not only textual authority but also pedagogical legitimacy, making its ethical logic available for repetition, adaptation, and further elaboration.

4.2. Reproduction and Pedagogical Simplification

The authority acquired by the *Taishang Ganying Pian* through imperial and literati endorsement created the conditions for its extensive reproduction, but its sustained circulation depended on a further transformation: pedagogical simplification. From the Ming period onward, the text became the object of continuous commentary, paraphrase, illustration, and vernacular exposition. These developments did not substantially alter the tract's ethical logic; rather, they stabilised and amplified it, enabling the model of ethical cultivation articulated in the *Ganying Pian* to be transmitted across social strata.

The proliferation of annotated editions and explanatory formats suggests that later readers treated the *Ganying Pian* not as a closed, canonical object but as a flexible instructional template. Various versions of commentaries and illustrated editions (such as the *Ganying Pian* Tushuo, commented on by Huang Zhengyuan in 1755) reframed the text for audiences with varying degrees of literacy. Visual materials, narrative exempla, and vernacular paraphrases were introduced not to revise the tract's moral claims, but to render its ethical calculus immediately intelligible and practically applicable. As the text gained wider circulation, its core ethical logic—particularly the framing of moral practice as capable of sustaining cultivation toward immortality—was increasingly reproduced across a range of Daoist genres, including morality books, canons, anecdotal notes, and verse. In this process, the core structure analysed in Section 2—a sufficient quantification, intention-sensitivity, and moral accountability path to immortality—remained intact.

For example, another morality book bears the title *Qisheng Dan* 起生丹, which declares:

见人之得，如己之得；见人之失，如己之失。此皆由一片天然血心所发。以此由浅及深，便能将千般利欲，化成一种仁慈。久而久之，何患道不得、仙不成。

To see another's gain as one's own gain, to see another's loss as one's own loss—such feelings spring from a single sheet of innate, blood-warm compassion. Applying this from shallow to deep can transform a thousand kinds of profit seeking into a single benevolence. In due course, how could one fear that the Way will not be attained, that immortality will not be realised? (Hu 2004, *Qisheng Dan* 起生丹, vol. 28, p. 588)

This process of pedagogical simplification also entailed a reconfiguration of who could plausibly engage in cultivation. Unlike technical Daoist manuals, which presuppose esoteric knowledge, ritual competence, or access to specialised resources, the cultivation first systematically structured in the *Ganying Pian* could be taught, memorised, and enacted without institutional mediation. In the late Ming and early Qing, the Quanzhen Daoist priest Wang Changyue 王常月 (1592–1680 CE) stated this model of cultivation in the *Biyuan Tanjing* 碧苑坛经:

志在圣贤，愿希仙佛，心存善念，口说善言，身行善事，接得善人，足踏善地，手持善物，厚重端严，身不妄动，心不妄游，期于必清，期于必静，久久功深。

Aspire to sagehood and wish to emulate the immortals and Buddhas. Keep benevolent thoughts in the heart, utter benevolent words, perform benevolent deeds, keep company with benevolent people, tread upon benevolent ground, hold benevolent objects; be grave, solid, proper; let the body not move rashly, let the mind not wander wildly; aim always at purity, aim always at tranquillity, and in the course of time, moral merits will accumulate. (Hu 2004, *Biyuan Tanjing* 碧苑坛经, vol. 10, p. 182)

Taken together, these materials do not indicate the emergence of new doctrinal claims; rather, they point to the consolidation of a cultivational grammar first articulated in the *Ganying Pian*. Ethical action—understood as cumulative, intention-sensitive, and cosmologically supervised—remained the central mechanism, even as textual forms, audiences, and modes of presentation diversified. Moral action itself became the site of practice, and everyday conduct the primary medium through which cultivation unfolded. The repeated assertion that even the illiterate could benefit from hearing the text read aloud underscores the extent to which ethical cultivation was detached from technical prerequisites.

The widespread use of illustrated editions further reinforced this shift. By translating moral injunctions into visual narratives and exemplary scenes, these editions enabled readers to grasp ethical causality through concrete situations drawn from ordinary life. Reward and punishment were depicted not as abstract cosmological principles, but as outcomes embedded in familiar social relations—family life, economic exchange, and communal interaction. Such representations strengthened the perception that ethical behaviour was not merely recommended but operationally effective as a mode of cultivation.

Crucially, this process of reproduction did not dilute the tract's religious orientation. Although later editions often foregrounded social morality and practical instruction, they continued to frame ethical conduct within a Daoist cosmological horizon of immortality, divine oversight, and moral response. What changed was not the metaphysical framework, but the mode of access. Ethical cultivation was rendered increasingly transparent, repeatable, and teachable, allowing the model articulated in the *Ganying Pian* to circulate as a shared pedagogical language across diverse communities. As part of late imperial popular culture, the *Ganying Pian* appeared as a familiar moral reference in literary works, where it functions as a recognisable symbol of normative ethical instruction. Worldwide, the *Ganying Pian* was translated into numerous languages, including Manchu, Tibetan, Japanese, Korean, and French. In 1835, the French Sinologist Stanislas Julien translated and published it in French, demonstrating its widespread influence.

In this sense, the proliferation of morality texts following the *Ganying Pian* should not be understood as a proliferation of new doctrines. Rather, it represents the consolidation of a cultivational model whose effectiveness lies precisely in its simplicity. By stabilising ethical practice as a reproducible and socially embedded form of cultivation, later morality texts ensured that the ethical logic of the *Ganying Pian* could be sustained beyond the confines of a single text and adapted to a wide range of historical and social contexts.

4.3. Ethical Cultivation and the Socialisation of Daoist Practice

The diffusion of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* did not merely result in the multiplication of morality texts; it contributed to the consolidation of ethical cultivation as a recognisable and socially embedded mode of Daoist practice. In later religious discourse, *jishan* 积善 (the accumulation of merit) was no longer treated solely as an auxiliary virtue but increasingly functioned as an organising principle around which communities, ritual spaces, and pedagogical activities were structured.

Some modern scholars have retrospectively described this orientation as a *jishan* approach within Daoism, encompassing morality halls, spirit-writing altars (鸾堂), and merit altars (善堂) under this school and other groups that explicitly adopted the *Ganying Pian* as a guide for practice (Kim 2020). While such labels should not be read as denoting a formal or unified sect, they nonetheless indicate that ethical cultivation had become a sufficiently stable and recognisable mode of practice to support collective identification. What is significant here is not the emergence of a new institutional lineage, but the normalisation of moral accumulation as a legitimate and effective way of “doing Daoist cultivation.” In 1949, when the Celestial Master’s Office on Mount Longhu was counting Daoist sects and followers, it also recognised the “Jishan School” (积善派) as a distinct sect and recorded that it had 7.69 million adherents (Nan 1996, p. 599).

This development was reinforced by the theological architecture of morality texts. Daoist moral instruction was consistently articulated in the name of divine figures—such as Taishang Laojun 太上老君, Wenchang Dijun 文昌帝君, Guansheng Dijun 关圣帝君, and Chunyang Lüzu 纯阳吕祖—who were presented not only as sources of moral norms but also as active supervisors of their implementation. Morality books depict a densely populated moral cosmos in which registers, life-allotment deities, and inspectors operate across heaven, earth, the human body, and domestic space. Ethical conduct is thus framed within a system of continuous observation and record-keeping, extending beyond outward action to include speech and even the arising of intention.

Throughout the moral exhortation programme, the narrative centres on divine agency: the gods promulgate rules, oversee their implementation, record compliance, and mete out reward or punishment accordingly. From the perspective of religious pedagogy, the moral logic articulated in Daoist morality texts can be fruitfully analysed through what Zhao Dunhua has described as a defining feature of an “ethical religion”: the promotion of social moral education in the name of the deity (Zhao 2005). Within the heavenly moral surveillance system constructed in morality books, the gods are the fountainhead of morality. The laws they enact are called *Tian lv* 天律 (Heavenly Laws) or *Yin Lv* 阴律 (Yin Laws), deemed far more complete and stringent than the secular Yang Laws 阳律. Yang Laws can punish only misdeeds already perpetrated; the wicked, being crafty, may exploit loopholes and evade just retribution. Yin Laws, by contrast, are exceedingly fine-grained: not only actions and words but even the faintest evil thought is recorded by the *Si Ming* 司命 (Directors of Fate), leaving no room for a lucky escape. “Many commit hidden evils in the dark yet seek to cover them in the light; little do they know men can be deceived but the gods cannot. However artfully you patch and cover, the divine eye is like lightning.” (Hu 2004, *Quanshi Guizhen* 劝世归真, vol. 28, p. 3) (多有阴为不善，而阳欲掩之。殊不知人易欺，而神不可欺。任尔弥缝多巧，神目如电。) “Yang Laws judge deeds, hence are lax; Yin Laws judge the heart, hence are dense.” (Hu 2004, *ShijieGongguo Ge* 十戒功过格, vol. 12, p. 41) (阳律多论迹，所以甚疏；阴律惟论心，所以甚密).

The result is a form of religious practice in which ethical life itself becomes the primary site of cultivation. Rather than withdrawing from society, practitioners are encouraged to realise the Dao through everyday conduct—within family relations, economic exchange,

and communal life—under the continuous gaze of divine oversight. In this sense, morality texts did not secularise Daoist practice; they socialised it. Ethical cultivation aligned personal discipline with collective order while preserving a distinctively Daoist cosmological horizon oriented toward immortality.

Seen from this perspective, the significance of the *Ganying Pian* lies not in announcing a universal moral transformation of Daoism, but in articulating a model of cultivation that could operate effectively within ordinary social life. By rendering ethical practice cumulative, intention-sensitive, and cosmologically enforced, morality texts enabled Daoist cultivation to expand beyond specialist circles and to function as a shared religious grammar across diverse social contexts. This reconfiguration represents not a rupture with earlier Daoist traditions, but a quiet and far-reaching recalibration of how cultivation could be lived, taught, and sustained.

Taken together, this section shows that the *Ganying Pian*'s ethical logic did not remain a local textual proposal but became reproducible across multiple sites of religious life. Its diffusion was enabled not by doctrinal novelty alone, but by a combination of public authority, pedagogical formats, and institutional imaginaries that rendered moral accumulation teachable and collectively actionable. This reception history proves further that in the case of the *Ganying Pian*, ethical conduct functioned as cultivation insofar as it was embedded in a framework that rendered moral causality legible, monitorable, and socially shareable. In this sense, the moral turn at stake is best understood not as the replacement of technique but as the stabilisation of an alternative cultivational pathway—one that relocated Daoist practice into the rhythms of ordinary social life whilst remaining oriented toward transcendence.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that the distinctiveness of the *Taishang Ganying Pian* lies not in the mere prominence of moral exhortation but in a structural reconfiguration of ethical practice within a Daoist model of cultivation. By reconstructing the tract's internal logic along three interconnected dimensions—quantified moral accumulation, intention-sensitive accountability, and an administrative cosmology of oversight—this study has shown how ethical conduct is rendered capable of sustaining cultivation toward immortality without reliance on specialised technical practices. It has further traced how this model was subsequently rendered reproducible through reception, commentary, and pedagogical adaptation, thereby clarifying the social and institutional conditions under which ethical practice could plausibly function as cultivation.

Read in isolation, the *Ganying Pian* presents a coherent framework in which everyday moral behaviour is converted into a cumulative, evaluable, and enforceable practice. Moral action is graded; intention is treated as morally efficacious prior to action; and both are embedded within a system of cosmic administration that registers conduct, conducts periodic assessments, and distributes consequences with relative predictability. Taken together, these features transform ethical life from a set of exhortations into a practicable mode of cultivation structured by feedback, reversibility, and progression.

The focused comparison with Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian* clarifies the specificity of this configuration. While Ge Hong strongly affirms the necessity of ethical conduct, he consistently restricts its function to a stabilising and preparatory role, and his epistemic hesitation concerning moral retribution prevents morality from being integrated into a dependable rhythm of practice. The *Ganying Pian*, by contrast, relocates moral action and intention into a framework of cumulative efficacy and enforceable response. The contrast, therefore, concerns not moral valuation but the ordering of virtue and technique and the

degree of certainty attributed to moral causality—conditions that determine whether ethics can become cultivation rather than merely support it.

Importantly, this argument does not imply that Daoist cultivation as a whole underwent a uniform or immediate moral reconfiguration, nor that ritual, alchemical, or technical repertoires were displaced. Rather, the *Ganying Pian* exemplifies a genre-specific yet influential model—consolidated within morality texts—in which ethical practice was organised as a self-sustaining pathway oriented toward transcendence. Section 4 has shown that this was not merely a textual claim: through canonisation, reproduction, and social embedding, the tract’s “cultivational grammar” became teachable and actionable in ordinary contexts, expanding Daoist practice beyond specialist circles whilst remaining grounded in a Daoist cosmology.

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold. Substantively, it explains how Daoist cosmology could be mobilised to make moral practice sufficient for cultivation by rendering ethical causality legible, monitorable, and institutionally imaginable. Methodologically, it offers a transferable framework for reading morality books not as simplified derivatives of technical Daoism but as texts capable of articulating coherent and rigorous models of practice in their own right. On this view, the *Ganying Pian* does not merely moralise Daoist cultivation; it stabilises an alternative pathway in which ethics, cosmology, and everyday social life are reorganised into a practicable route toward immortality.

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Note

- ¹ There are different definitions of the specific meaning of *ji* and *suan* without a universal agreement. The interpretation shared by many scholars, including David Jordan, is that *ji* equals 12 years and *suan* equals 100 days (as stated in the translation). Other interpretations include that found in Duan Chengshi’s *Juyang Zazu* (酉阳杂俎), which specifies *ji* as 300 days and *suan* as 100 days; and that found in *Baopuzi Neipian*, where *suan* equals 3 days or one day. Although the figures are different, they all represent an allotted, quantified life span.

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