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THE TITLE OF THE CANTONG QI

This is a section from the Introduction to  
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the Source of the Taoist Way of the Golden Elixir*  
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taries, the contrasting views on its nature and history, and, not least, the multiple possible meanings of several terms and verses. These issues have been augmented—and, in part, inevitably caused—by the fact that the main tradition on which the *Cantong qi* has exerted its influence, and by which it has been read and interpreted, is Taoist alchemy, in both of its branches: Waidan, or External Alchemy, and Neidan, or Internal Alchemy.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, Neidan is the legacy that has contributed to shape the dominant image and understanding of the *Cantong qi* in China, by placing this work at the origins of its teachings and practices, and by offering explications that differ in many details among different authors, but have one point in common: the *Cantong qi* contains a complete illustration of the principles and methods of Internal Alchemy. According to this view, the *Cantong qi* is an alchemical text, and in particular, is the first Neidan text. In addition to this one, there has been, within the Taoist tradition, a second, less well-known way of reading the text. This reading takes account of a point that is reflected in the title of the *Cantong qi*, is stated more than once in its verses, and is often discussed by its commentators, including some of those associated with Neidan: the *Cantong qi* is concerned not with one, but with three major subjects, and joins them to one another in a single doctrine, of which alchemy is one aspect. To introduce our discussion of this point, we shall look at one of the most visible, but also most complex, aspects of the *Cantong qi*, namely, its title.

### § 1. THE TITLE OF THE CANTONG QI

In its complete form, the title of the *Cantong qi* is made of two main parts. The first part, *Zhouyi* 周易 (Changes of the Zhou), is another name of the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*, whose cosmological system plays a fundamental role in the *Cantong qi*.<sup>3</sup> Placing the name of one

<sup>2</sup> External Alchemy is based on the refining of minerals and metals, which are heated in a vessel in order to extract their pure essences and compound them into different elixirs. In Internal Alchemy, the ingredients of the Elixir are the prime components of the cosmos and the human being, and the entire process takes place within the practitioner. External Alchemy is documented from the second century BCE, and Internal Alchemy from the eighth century CE.

<sup>3</sup> The Zhou (1045–246 BCE) is the dynasty during which, probably as early

of the Classics before the actual title of a work reflects the usage of the “weft texts” (*weishu*, commonly referred to as the “apocrypha” among Western scholars), an early textual corpus whose cosmology is rooted in the *Book of Changes*.

The relation of the *Cantong qi* to this corpus will be examined below; as we shall see, it is not entirely clear whether the relation has textual grounds, or only lies in the background that the *Cantong qi* shares with the cosmological traditions. The last word in the second part of the title of the *Cantong qi*, nevertheless, also suggests an association with the “weft texts.” *Qi* 契, literally meaning “token, pledge, seal” or “contract,” belongs to a series of closely related words that appear in the titles of several apocryphal texts, and later also became important in Taoism. These words—which include *you* 郵 (mark), *qian* 鈐 (seal, badge), and especially *fu* 符 (*symbolon*, sign, token, tally)—refer to two significant aspects of the apocrypha and of the Taoist writings that share similar perspectives. A text belonging to this genre is a manifest sign of a divine revelation; at the same time, it represents its legitimate possessor’s intangible but unbreakable bonds to the source of the revelation, and grants access to it.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the expression *cantong* 參同, commentators and other authors have offered two main interpretations. According to the first view, *can* 參 means “merging, being one,” and *tong* 同 means “unity.” Since *qi* 契 also indicates the idea of “joining into one” (in this case, the possessor of the text and the source of its doctrine), all three words in the title of the *Cantong qi*, according to this view, refer to the ideas of union and oneness. On the basis of this reading, the title of the *Cantong qi* should be translated, for example, as *Joining as One with Unity*. This interpretation was first stated in the anonymous

as the ninth or the eighth century BCE, the divinatory portions of the *Book of Changes* were composed. Most of the cosmological portions date, instead, from the third-second centuries BCE. These portions include the *Xici* or *Appended Statements*, from which the *Cantong qi* draws several sentences. According to another view, *zhouyi* means, approximately, “cyclical change.” A synthetic but highly reliable survey of the composition and the dating of the *Book of Changes* is found in Shaughnessy, “I ching (Chou i).”

<sup>4</sup> These features of the apocrypha were clearly stated in a masterly study by Anna Seidel: “. . . a typical apocryphal title always indicates that its text, besides telling of divine revelation, is in itself a certificate testifying to the owner’s favor with Heaven” (“Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 309).

Waidan commentary (ca. 700), and later in the commentaries by Peng Xiao (947) and Zhu Xi (1197). The *Cantong qi* itself uses the word *can* with this meaning in one of its verses (43:12).

According to the second view, *can* 參 means, or rather stands for, *san* 三, “three.” In this view, the title of the *Cantong qi* alludes to its property of being a *seal* that testifies to the *unity* of *three* components and, for that reason, enables its possessor to comprehend their unity. This reading of the word *can* was first explicitly suggested in the commentary by Yu Yan (1284), and was later accepted by several other commentators and authors.<sup>5</sup>

Which of the two interpretations is correct is not a meaningful question, since whoever chose the title *Cantong qi* was certainly aware of its dual sense. It is, instead, worthy of note that those who favor the second reading often support it by quoting passages found in the final portions of the *Cantong qi* (sections 84 and 87). These passages state that the *Cantong qi* is concerned with “three ways,” which stem from, and lead to, the same source. The three ways are defined as the system of the *Book of Changes*, Taoism (Huang-Lao, so called from the names of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi), and alchemy (“the work with the fire of the furnace”).

The order in which the three subjects are mentioned is significant—so significant that, to my knowledge, all authors and commentators who mention the three subjects refer to them in the same order, even when they refer to them with different Chinese terms.<sup>6</sup> The reason of this arrangement can be understood in light of the *Cantong qi*’s own doctrines. “Cosmology” in the *Cantong qi* is not only an explication of the functioning of the cosmos, but in first place an exposition of

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that, although the anonymous Waidan commentary explains *can* as meaning “to merge” (*za* 雜), it mentions the merging of “three things” (*samwu* 三物), identifying them in alchemical terms as Water, Soil, and Metal. See *Zhouyi cantong qi zhu*, 1.1a.

<sup>6</sup> Several commentators, for example, refer to the “three ways” as those of “government” (*yuzheng*), “nourishing one’s Nature” (*yangxing*), and “preserving and ingesting” (*fushi*). The use of the term “government” is explained by the fact that at the center of the Chinese cosmological system stands, in both a symbolic and a literal way, the ruler, who is, in the human realm, the supreme guarantor of the balance among Heaven, Earth, and Man. In accordance with this view, the ruler is often mentioned in the cosmological portions of the *Cantong qi*. On the term *fushi* see the textual note to verse 27:3, page 236.

the relation of the cosmos to the Dao, and of man's position in relation to both. Based on this fundamental view, the *Cantong qi* presents two ways of realization. The first is what it calls Taoism ("Huang-Lao"), which for the *Cantong qi* is the way of "non-doing," canonized in the *Daode jing*. The second is alchemy—in the form canonized by the *Cantong qi* itself—which is the way of "doing." Borrowing two terms from the *Daode jing*, the *Cantong qi* defines these two ways as those of "superior virtue" and "inferior virtue," respectively (see section 20).

When this understanding of the purport of the *Cantong qi* is taken into account, certain important aspects of the text are clarified. First, it is not difficult to identify, within the mystifying, but certainly not haphazard, sequence of poems in the first two Books, several contiguous portions that are devoted to each of the three main subjects:

*Book 1:* sections 1–17, Cosmology; 18–27, Taoism; 28–42, Alchemy

*Book 2:* sections 43–52, Cosmology; 53–61, Taoism; 62–74, Alchemy

As suggested below (pp. 29 ff.), the final Book 3 is made of later, miscellaneous materials.<sup>7</sup> Second, this understanding of the purport of the *Cantong qi* helps to make sense of other issues, such as the different traditional views on its authorship, and the dating of its alchemical portions.

The next three sections of this Introduction (§ 2–4) are concerned with these and other related questions. They are followed by a short presentation of the main commentaries to the *Cantong qi* (§ 5), and by an overview of its three main subjects (§ 6–8). The concluding section (§ 9) looks at the pivotal role played by this work in the shift from External to Internal Alchemy.

## § 2. A SINGLE AUTHOR, OR MULTIPLE AUTHORS?

For about a millennium, the authorship of the *Cantong qi* has been attributed to Wei Boyang, a character with distinctly legendary

<sup>7</sup> Sections 22–25 contain a general description of the principles of alchemy as the way of "inferior virtue," and thus pertain to the "Taoist" portions. The subdivisions suggested above are close to those that Liu Yiming adopts in his version of the "Ancient Text" of the *Cantong qi* (1799). The main differences are that, in Liu Yiming's text, sections 37–38 concern cosmology; 39–40, Taoism; 61, alchemy; and 70–71 and 74, Taoism. On the "Ancient Text" see below, pp. 31 ff.