

SAMPLE

FABRIZIO PREGADIO



Essays  
*on*  
Taoism  
*and*  
Taoist  
Alchemy

Volume 1

Golden Elixir Press



ESSAYS ON TAOISM  
AND TAOIST ALCHEMY

VOLUME I

This sample contains the first 6 pages of each essay.

Visit the page on this book in the Golden Elixir website:

[www.goldenelixir.com/press/tao\\_06\\_essays\\_taoism\\_taoist\\_alchemy\\_I.html](http://www.goldenelixir.com/press/tao_06_essays_taoism_taoist_alchemy_I.html)

By the same author:

*Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*  
(Stanford University Press, 2006)

*The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, editor (Routledge, 2008)

*The Seal of the Unity of the Three* (2 vols., Golden Elixir Press,  
2011, 2012)

*Taoist Internal Alchemy: An Anthology of Neidan Texts* (Golden  
Elixir Press, 2019)

*Dictionary of Taoist Internal Alchemy* (Brill, 2024)

*The Taoist Tradition: An Introduction to Teachings, Schools, and  
Practices* (Golden Elixir Press, 2025)

Fabrizio Pregadio

Essays on Taoism  
and Taoist Alchemy

Volume 1

Golden Elixir Press

Golden Elixir Press  
Mountain View, CA  
[www.goldenelixir.com](http://www.goldenelixir.com)

© 2026 Fabrizio Pregadio  
All rights reserved

ISBN 978-0-9855475-6-1 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-0-9855475-4-7 (hardcover)

Except for brief quotations, no part of this book  
may be reproduced in any form  
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,  
including photocopying and recording,  
or by any information storage and retrieval system,  
without permission in writing from the publisher

## Contents

List of Figures and Tables, vii

Preface, ix

### *Introduction*

The Way of the Golden Elixir, 1

### *Essays*

- 1 Waidan, or External Alchemy, 63
- 2 Early Taoist Meditation and the Origins of Internal Alchemy, 105
- 3 Creation and Its Inversion: Cosmos, Human Being, and Elixir in the *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), 153
- 4 Form, Formlessness, and Ways of Liberation in Taoism, 181
- 5 Views of Time in Chinese Alchemy, 225
- 6 Discriminations in Cultivating the Dao: Liu Yiming (1734–1821) and His *Xiuzhen houbian*, 247

### *Appendix*

Taoist Alchemy: An Annotated Bibliography, 285

Works Cited, 347



## List of Figures and Tables

### *Figures*

- 1 Talisman for Warding off Harm, 10
- 2 Continuity between Taoist meditation and Internal Alchemy, 15
- 3 *Xiuzhen tu* and *Neijing tu*, 40
- 4 Essence, Breath, and Spirit shown as three joined circles in the practitioner's body, 56
- 5 The twelve stages of the Fire phases, 58
- 6 The alchemical process represented by the main trigrams of the *Book of Changes*, 60
- 7 The twelve "sovereign hexagrams," 94
- 8 "Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are the inner and the outer walls," 157
- 9 "Sun and Moon make change," 166
- 10 The three stages of the alchemical process, 228
- 11 The Waterwheel, 238
- 12 The River Chariot, 239

### *Tables*

- 1 The "downward" stages of cosmogony and the corresponding "upward" stages of Neidan, 51
- 2 Cosmological and alchemical emblems representing the stages of Unity, precelestial Yin and Yang, and postcelestial Yin and Yang, 92
- 3 The *yueti najia* device as developed by Yu Fan and applied in the *Cantong qi*, 232
- 4 The *shi'er xiaoxi* device and its association with other duodenary series, 233



## Preface

This book contains a selection of my studies on Taoism and Taoist Internal Alchemy published in the past two decades. It was not easy, often, to resist the temptation of rewriting, deleting, or adding whole paragraphs, but the eight studies are reproduced here substantially in their original forms. I have only harmonized translations, standardized bibliographic references, corrected any error that I noticed, and added several cross-references.

This is the best time for me to express my gratitude to several teachers, colleagues and friends. Some of them are now not among us, but all of them have guided my work, offered support at crucial times, and taught me most of what I know. In Italy (Ca' Foscari University in Venice, 1978–83), Lionello Lanciotti, Maurizio Scarpari, and Alfredo Cadonna. In Holland (Leiden University, 1980–81), Erik Zürcher and Burchard Mansvelt-Beck. In Japan (Kyoto University, Institute for Research in the Humanities, 1985–90), Yamada Keiji 山田慶児, Yoshikawa Tadao 吉川忠夫, and Mugitani Kunio 麥谷邦夫. In my first period spent in Germany (Technische Universität Berlin, 1999–2002), Welf Schnell and Werner Schütt. In the United States (Stanford University, 2001–9), Carl Bielefeldt and Bernard Faure. In my second period in Germany (International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, 2011–22, and until present wherever we happen to be), Michael Lackner. In Taiwan (Academia Sinica, Institute of History and Philology, three semesters between 2023 and 2026), Wang Fan-sen 王汎森 and Chu Pingyi 祝平一.

Moreover, I was fortunate to have met, worked with, or learnt from, in different times and places and for shorter or longer periods, Tim Barrett, Chang Chao-jan 張超然, Master Dong Naihong 董迺閔, Monica Esposito, Antonino Forte, Ho Peng Yoke 何丙郁, Hsiao Chin-ming 蕭進銘, Hsieh Shu-wei 謝世維, Isabelle Robinet, Kristofer Schipper, Anna Seidel, Nathan Sivin, Dominic Steavu, Master Zhang Xincheng 張信誠, and Xiaokun. All of them know, or knew, the reasons of my gratitude.

Fabrizio Pregadio  
Spring 2026



## Introduction

### The Way of the Golden Elixir

Originally published as *The Way of the Golden Elixir: A Historical Overview of Taoist Alchemy* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2012; Occasional Papers, no. 3).

#### CHINESE ALCHEMY

Chinese alchemy has a history of more than two thousand years, recorded from the second century BCE to the present day. Its two main branches, known as Waidan 外丹, or External Alchemy, and Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy, partly share their doctrinal foundations but differ from one another in the respective practices.

Waidan (lit., “external elixir”), which arose earlier, is based on the compounding of elixirs through the manipulation of natural substances and the heating of ingredients in a crucible. Its texts consist of recipes, along with descriptions of ingredients, ritual rules, and passages concerned with the cosmological associations of minerals, metals, instruments, and operations. Neidan (lit., “internal elixir”) borrows a significant part of its vocabulary and imagery from its earlier counterpart, but aims to produce the elixir within the alchemist’s person, using the primary components of the cosmos and the human being as ingredients. Neidan texts cover a wider spectrum of subjects compared to Waidan; at its ends are, on the one hand, teachings on the Dao (the absolute principle, and the origin of the manifested world) and, on the other, descriptions of practices based on the mind and the body.

The main designations of the elixir are *huandan* 還丹, or Reverted Elixir, and—especially in the “internal” branch—*jindan* 金丹, or Golden Elixir. Gold (*jin* 金) represents the state of constancy and immutability beyond the change and transiency that characterize the cosmos. As for *dan* 丹, “elixir,” lexical analysis shows that the seman-

tic field of this term—which also denotes a shade of red—evolves from a root-meaning of “essence”; its connotations include the reality, principle, or true nature of an entity, or its most basic and significant element, quality, or property.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of this term, the authors of alchemical texts often call their tradition the Way of the Golden Elixir (*jindan zhi dao* 金丹之道).

### *Basic Doctrines*

Neither alchemy as a whole, nor Waidan or Neidan individually, constitutes a “school” with a definite canonical corpus and a single line of transmission. On the contrary, each of the two main branches displays a remarkable variety of doctrinal views and forms of practice. Beyond its different and almost endless formulations, though, the Way of the Golden Elixir is characterized by a foundation in doctrinal principles first set out in the founding texts of Taoism—especially the *Daode jing* 道德經, or *Book of the Way and its Virtue*—concerning the relation between the Dao and the world. The cosmos is conceived of as the last stage in a series of transformations that cause a sequence of simultaneous shifts from Non-Being (*wu* 無) to Unity (*yi* 一), duality (Yin and Yang), and finally multiplicity (*wanwu* 萬物, the “ten thousand things”). The alchemist intends to retrace this process backwards. The practice should be performed under close supervision of a master, who provides “oral instructions” (*koujue* 口訣) necessary to understand the processes that adepts perform with minerals and metals, or undergo within themselves.

In both Waidan and Neidan, the practice is variously said to grant transcendence (a state described by such expressions as “joining with the Dao”), immortality (usually meant a spiritual condition), longevity, healing (either in a broad sense or with regard to specific illnesses), and—especially in Waidan—communication with the deities of the celestial pantheon and protection from spirits, demons, and other malignant entities.

<sup>1</sup> For more details on this point, see Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*, 70–75.

*The Alchemical Corpus*

While historical and literary sources provide many relevant details, the main repository of Chinese alchemical sources is the Taoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏), the largest collection of Taoist works. About one fifth of its 1,500 texts are closely related to the various Waidan and Neidan traditions that developed until the mid-fifteenth century, when the current edition of the Canon was compiled and printed. Several later texts, belonging to Neidan, are found in the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要 (Essentials of the Taoist Canon, originally compiled around 1800 and expanded in 1906), and many others have been published in smaller collections or as independent works. Modern study of the Chinese alchemical literature began in the past century, after the Canon was reprinted and made widely available in 1926. Among the main contributions in Western languages one may cite those by Joseph Needham (1900–95), Ho Peng Yoke (1926–2014), and Nathan Sivin for Waidan; and Isabelle Robinet (1932–2000), Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein (1945–2009), and Catherine Despeux for Neidan.<sup>2</sup>

## ORIGINS OF W Aidan

From a historical point of view, nothing is known about the beginnings of alchemy in China. The earliest sources attribute their doctrines and methods to deities who transmitted them to one another and finally revealed them to humanity. Other records consists of tales on the search of immortality, or of legends on a “medicine of deathlessness” found in the paradises of the immortals.

Several sources and studies have associated the origins of alchemy with the *fangshi* 方士 (“masters of methods”), a numerous and eclectic group of practitioners of different techniques—numerology, astrology, divination, exorcism, medicine—who were often admitted to court by emperors and local rulers during the Han dynasty (second century BCE-second century CE) and later. Although historical records suggest that few *fangshi* were actually involved in making elixirs, one of them is associated with the first mention of alchemy in China. Around 133 BCE, Li Shaojun 李少君 suggested that Emperor Wu 武帝

<sup>2</sup> A bibliography of studies on Chinese alchemy is found in the Appendix to the present book.

of the Han should follow the example of the mythical Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), who had performed an alchemical method at the beginning of human time.<sup>3</sup> Li Shaojun said that the emperor should perform offerings to an alchemical stove in order to summon supernatural beings, in whose presence cinnabar would transmute itself into gold. Eating and drinking from cups and dishes made of that gold would prolong the emperor's life and enable him to meet the immortals. Then, after performing the major imperial ceremonies to Heaven and Earth, the emperor would obtain immortality.

少君言上曰：「祠灶則致物，致物而丹沙可化為黃金，黃金成以為飲食器則益壽，益壽而海中蓬萊僊者乃可見，見之以封禪則不死，黃帝是也。...」於是天子始親祠灶，遣方士入海求蓬萊安期生之屬，而事化丹沙諸藥齊為黃金矣。

[Li] Shaojun told the emperor: "By making offerings to the stove, one can summon the supernatural beings (*wu*). If one summons them, cinnabar can be transmuted into gold. When gold has been produced and made into vessels for eating and drinking, one can prolong one's life. If one's life is prolonged, one will be able to meet the immortals of the Penglai island in the midst of the sea. When one has seen them and has performed the Feng and Shan ceremonies [to Heaven and Earth, respectively], one will never die. The Yellow Emperor did just so. . . ."

Thereupon the emperor for the first time personally made offerings to the stove. He sent several *fangshi* to the sea to search for Penglai and for those like Master Anqi, and also occupied himself with the transmutation of cinnabar and other substances into gold.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that, while this account shows that alchemy existed in China by the second century BCE, it does not describe an actual method for making an elixir; and—more important—Li Shaojun's elixir was not meant to be ingested, but only used to make vessels. The earliest mention of elixir ingestion is found in the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (Discussions on Salt and Iron), a work dating from ca. 60

<sup>3</sup> Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (hereafter SCC), V:3, 29–33; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 28–30.

<sup>4</sup> *Shiji* (Records of the Historian), chapter 28.1385; trans. Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 30. Penglai is one of the "isles of the immortals."

BCE.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, as we shall see, the ritual aspects involved in Li Shaojun's procedure continued to perform a major role in the later Waidan tradition.

### THE TAIQING (GREAT CLARITY) TRADITION

Details about the first clearly identifiable tradition of Waidan emerge about three centuries after Li Shaojun. Named after the heaven that granted its revelation, the Taiqing 太清 (Great Clarity) tradition originated in Jiangnan, the region south of the lower Yangzi River that was also crucial for the history of Taoism during the Six Dynasties (third-sixth centuries).

According to accounts found in different sources, the Taiqing texts and methods were first bestowed to the Yellow Emperor by the Mysterious Woman (Xuannü 玄女), one of his teachers in the esoteric arts. Later, around the year 200, a "divine man" (*shenren* 神人) revealed them to Zuo Ci 左慈, a Han-dynasty *fangshi* who is also involved in the origins of other Taoist traditions. The Taiqing texts then came into the possession of the family of Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), who summarizes them in his *Baopu zi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature).<sup>6</sup>

The three main Taiqing texts are the *Taiqing jing* 太清經 (Book of Great Clarity), the *Jiudan jing* 九丹經 (Book of the Nine Elixirs), and the *Jinye jing* 金液經 (Book of the Golden Liquor). The versions of these works found in the Taoist Canon make it possible to reconstruct several essential aspects of early Chinese alchemy.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Ritual*

In the Taiqing texts, compounding the elixir is the central part of a process involving several stages, each of which is marked by the

<sup>5</sup> Needham, SCC, V:3, 34–35; Sivin, *Chinese Alchemy: Preliminary Studies*, 25–26; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 30–31.

<sup>6</sup> A complete but not thoroughly reliable translation of the *Baopu zi neipian* is found in Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung (Pao-p'u tzu)*. Chapters 4 and 16 of this work are concerned with Waidan. See also below, p. 66 note 9.

<sup>7</sup> See Pregadio, *Great Clarity*.

performance of rites and ceremonies. The alchemical practice consists of this entire process, and not only of the work at the furnace.

To receive texts and instructions, the disciple offers tokens to his master and makes a vow of secrecy. Then he retires to a mountain or a secluded place with his attendants and performs the preliminary purification practices, which consist of making ablutions and observing the precepts for several months. He delimits the ritual space with talismans (*fu* 符) to protect it from harmful influences, and builds at its center the Chamber of the Elixirs (*danshi* 丹室, i.e., the alchemical laboratory), in which only he and his attendants may enter. The furnace is placed at the center of the Chamber of the Elixirs.

When the purification practices are completed, the fire may be started on a day indicated as suitable by the traditional calendar. This stage is marked by an invocation addressed to the highest gods, namely the Great Lord of the Dao (Da Daojun 大道君) and his two attendants, Lord Lao (Laojun 老君, the deified aspect of Laozi 老子) and the Lord of Great Harmony (Taihe jun 太和君):

起火時，當於釜邊施祭。以好白酒五升，牛羊脯各三斤，黃粱米飯二升，大棗三升，梨一斗，熟雞子三十枚，鯉魚三頭各重三斤。凡用皆三案，案皆用二杯燒香。再拜，祝曰：小兆臣某共誠惟大道君、老君、太和君。哀。小兆臣某貪生藥，道某令藥不飛不亡，皆使伏火。藥已好善，隨手變化，黃白悉伏，服藥飛仙，朝於紫宮，命長無極，得至真人。行酒起，再拜畢，諸赤果木橘柚皆上之訖。然放火如法。

When you start the fire you should perform a ceremony beside the crucible. Take five pints of good quality white liquor, three pounds of dried ox meat, the same amount of dried mutton, two pints of yellow millet and rice, three pints of large dates, one peck of pears, thirty cooked chicken's eggs, and three carp, each weighing three pounds. Place them on three stands, and on each stand burn incense in two cups. Pay obeisance twice, and utter the following invocation:

"This petty man, (*name of the adept*), verily and entirely devotes his thoughts to the Great Lord of the Dao, Lord Lao, and the Lord of Great Harmony. Alas! This petty man, (*name of the adept*), covets the Medicine of Life! Lead him so that the Medicine will not volatilize and be lost, but rather be fixed by fire! Let the Medicine be good and efficacious, let the transmuta-

## Waidan, or External Alchemy

Originally published as “Elixirs and Alchemy” in Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook*, 165–95 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).

Chinese alchemy (*jindan zhi dao* 金丹之道 “Way of the Golden Elixir,” *liandan shu* 鍊丹術 “art of refining the elixir,” or *lianjin shu* 鍊金術 “art of refining gold”) developed in two main branches along its two thousand years of documented history. The first branch, Waidan 外丹 or External Alchemy, focuses on the compounding of elixirs through the refining of natural substances. The second, Neidan 內丹 or Internal Alchemy, intends to regenerate the primary constituents of the cosmos and the human being.

This essay is concerned with Waidan. Research on the history, doctrines, and practices of this branch of Chinese alchemy faces the limited amount of available sources, along with the unknown or uncertain date and the complex language of many documents. Despite these restrictions and ambiguities, the received texts provide evidence of a basic feature. Their transmission and their relation to doctrinal and textual corpora show that the history of Waidan is characterized by a progressive shift of concern from the world of gods and demons to a focus on the cosmos as the domain generated by the Dao and in which the Dao manifests itself. This transition culminated between the late Six Dynasties and the early Tang period (ca. sixth to seventh centuries), and not only affected the history of Waidan but also paved the way for the rise of Neidan. Knowing the history of Waidan is, therefore, essential to understand the origins of Neidan.

## HISTORY

*Earliest References*

Virtually nothing is known about the origins of alchemy in China. Early scriptures trace their teachings and methods to revelations granted by immortals and divine beings, and do not provide reliable historical details. The belief in a medicine of immortality (*xianyao* 仙藥), typically found on remote mountains and islands,<sup>1</sup> must have paralleled the birth and early development of Waidan, but reciprocal influences can hardly be assessed beyond the partially shared background.

Despite speculations on Zou Yan's 鄒衍 (ca. 350–270 BCE) role in the origin of alchemy, no extant source documents his relation to Waidan, and no text on the elixirs has ever been ascribed to him. The writings of the cosmological school of thought (*yinyang jia* 陰陽家), of which Zou Yan is traditionally considered the founder, dealt with numerology and astrology, and extant fragments of works attributed to him are mainly concerned with the theory of dynastic succession.<sup>2</sup> Equally questionable is the relevance of an edict that Emperor Jingdi 景帝 (r. 156–141) issued in 144 BCE to forbid the counterfeiting of gold. While some scholars have seen in that document the earliest allusion to alchemy in any civilization, the edict did not ban the making of elixirs but the private coining of cash. In fact, according to a second-century commentator, it abrogated a decree of the previous emperor who had allowed people to cast coins without authorization.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest mention of alchemy in China occurs in connection with the *fangshi* 方士 (“masters of methods”), specialists in cosmological and esoteric arts employed by rulers from the fourth century

<sup>1</sup> Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (hereafter SCC), V.3:1–12 passim.

<sup>2</sup> Needham, SCC, II: 236–38; Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*, 25–27. On the “School of Yin and Yang” (*yinyang jia*) see Ngo Van Xuyet, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne*, 13–29, and Nathan Sivin, “The Myth of the Naturalists,” 10–12.

<sup>3</sup> Sivin, *Chinese Alchemy: Preliminary Studies*, 22; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 27–28.

BCE.<sup>4</sup> Although few *fangshi* were skilled in making elixirs, some of them are ascribed with the transmission of alchemical texts and practices in the later tradition. The first one is Li Shaojun 李少君 who, around 133 BCE, suggested to Emperor Wudi's 武帝 that his attempt to reach immortality would have benefited from the transmutation of cinnabar into an elixir. Eating and drinking from vessels made of alchemical gold would prolong the emperor's life and enable him to meet transcendent beings.<sup>5</sup>

The ingestion of elixirs is first mentioned in the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (Discussions on Salt and Iron), dating from ca. 60 BCE.<sup>6</sup> Around the same years, details on alchemical texts emerge for the first time in connection with Liu Xiang's 劉向 (first century BCE) failed attempt at making alchemical gold.<sup>7</sup> Liu apparently was inspired by a work now lost, the *Hongbao yuanbi shu* 鴻寶苑祕術 (Arts from the Garden of Secrets of the Great Treasure), that contained techniques for conjuring spirits and for making gold along with "important methods by Zou Yan for prolonging life." Bibliographic sources confirm that this and other writings compiled under the patronage of Prince Liu An 劉安 of Huainan (180–122, better known as Huainan zi 淮南子) included sections devoted to alchemy.<sup>8</sup> No explicit reference to alchemy appears in the *Huainan zi* 淮南子 (The Master of Huainan), but this work contains a passage on the natural evolution of minerals, a prominent concept in later Waidan theory to which we shall return.

<sup>4</sup> Ngo Van Xuyet, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne*; DeWoskin, *Doctors, Diviners and Magicians of Ancient China*; Harper, "Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought," esp. 822–33 and 827.

<sup>5</sup> *Shiji* (Records of the Historian), 28.1385. See Needham, SCC, V.3:29–31; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 29–33. This passage is translated on page 4 above.

<sup>6</sup> Needham, SCC, V.3:34–35; Sivin, *Chinese Alchemy*, 25–26; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 30–31.

<sup>7</sup> Needham, SCC, V.3:13–14 and 35; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Le Blanc, *Huai-nan tzu: Philosophical Synthesis in Early Han Thought*, 43–45; Roth, *The Textual History of the Huai-nan Tzu*, 23–25. Fragments of the *Hongbao yuanbi shu* are translated in Needham, SCC, V.3:25–26.

### *The Taiqing Tradition*

Valuable documentation on the next historical stage of Waidan is provided by Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) in his *Baopu zi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature; hereafter *Baopu zi*), first completed around 317 and revised around 335.<sup>9</sup> Born into a family of the southern aristocracy near present-day Nanjing, Ge Hong became a disciple of Zheng Yin 鄭隱 at the age of fourteen and studied under him for five years. He later served the imperial administration in various capacities. While Ge Hong acknowledges twice that he had not compounded any elixir by the time he wrote his *Baopu zi*,<sup>10</sup> hagiographic accounts tell that he retired on Mount Luofu (Luofu shan 羅浮山, Guangdong) late in life to devote himself to alchemical practices.<sup>11</sup>

In his work, Ge Hong provides an overview of the religious, medical, exorcistic, and esoteric practices prevalent in the southeastern region of Jiangnan 江南 (south of the lower Yangzi River), partly on the basis of passages copied or summarized from scriptures that he had received from Zheng Yin.<sup>12</sup> Two chapters of the *Baopu zi* are especially devoted to alchemy. One (*juan* 4) focuses on the *Book of Great Clarity* (*Taiqing jing* 太清經), the *Book of the Nine Elixirs* (*Jiudan jing* 九丹經), and the *Book of the Golden Liquor* (*Jinye jing* 金液經). While their methods are mostly based on minerals, the other chapter (*juan* 16) contains recipes centered on metals. Ge Hong says that the ritual context of the two sets of practices was similar, but the

<sup>9</sup> A full but not entirely reliable translation of this work is found in Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung (Pao-p'u tzu)*. Partial translations include Feifel, “Pao-p'u tzu nei-p'ien,” and (for the non-alchemical chapters) Che, *La Voie des Divins Immortels*.

<sup>10</sup> Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 70 and 262.

<sup>11</sup> Ge Hong's autobiography is translated in Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 6–21. One of the hagiographic accounts is translated in Davis, “Ko Hung (Pao P'u Tzu), Chinese Alchemist of the Fourth Century.” See also Ōfuchi, “Katsu Kō den kō,” and Chen Feilong, *Ge Hong zhi wenlun ji qi shengping*.

<sup>12</sup> Surveys of Ge Hong's view on these subjects are found in Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, 78–113, and in Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 18–97.

respective scriptures were transmitted by different lineages.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the *Baopu zi* quotes, summarizes, or alludes to many other Waidan methods, mostly from unknown sources.<sup>14</sup>

References found in later works show that the three scriptures mentioned above formed the core of the main alchemical corpus in early China. Their extant versions in the Taoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏; see below the section “Texts”) acquaint us with doctrines, rites, and techniques of the earliest known Waidan tradition, named Taiqing 太清 (Great Clarity) after the Heaven that bestows their revelation.<sup>15</sup> These texts display a marked consistence in their main features. The same divinities confer their revelation; similar ceremonies regulate their transmission and the performance of their practices (see below the section “Practices”); communication with divine beings and expulsion of dangerous spirits are among the main purposes of the methods that they describe; and the major features of the techniques they expound are common to all of them.

Ge Hong’s testimony also provides background on the history of Waidan in the early Six Dynasties. The three main texts, he says, were first brought to Jiangnan by Zuo Ci 左慈, a *fangshi* who had received them as a divine revelation on Mount Tianzhu (Tianzhu shan 天柱山, in present-day eastern Anwei) at the end of the second century.<sup>16</sup> The *Baopu zi* closely reflects the interaction of the alchemical methods with other practices of the native southern tradition, including the ingestion of preparations based on plant products for exorcistic and therapeutic purposes.<sup>17</sup> The elixirs shared with them the power of healing illnesses and keeping away harmful spirits. At the same time, Ge Hong emphasizes that alchemy grants access to higher spiritual realms and is therefore superior to healing, exorcism, and other practices such as gymnastics (*daoyin* 導引), breathing, or sexual techniques. The Chinese alchemical tradition as a whole—both Waidan and Neidan—will continue to highlight this point throughout its history.

<sup>13</sup> Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 261.

<sup>14</sup> Needham, SCC, V.3:81–113.

<sup>15</sup> On this tradition see Pregadio, *Great Clarity*.

<sup>16</sup> Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 69–70; Ngo Van Xuyet, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne*, 138–39.

<sup>17</sup> See Yamada Toshiaki, “Longevity Techniques and the Compilation of the *Lingbao wufuxu*.”

*Shangqing Taoism and Alchemy*

Despite Ge Hong's claim, the alchemical practices described in the early Waidan corpus and in the *Baopu zi* only represent an intermediate stage—both historically and doctrinally—between the local traditions of Jiangnan and the later developments in the religious history of the same area. For the history of Chinese alchemy, the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) revelations of 364–70 were the first and most important of these developments. The revelations resulted into a new hierarchical rearrangement of the southern religious customs and of their historical or legendary representatives. The new arrangement assigned Waidan a place higher than that of ritual and exorcistic practices, but lower compared to the techniques privileged by Shangqing, especially meditation.<sup>18</sup> Some earlier notable figures related to Waidan (including Zuo Ci) found a place in the Shangqing rosters of semi-divine beings, and some Shangqing adepts did practice elixir compounding, the most distinguished among them being Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), who experimented with Waidan in the first decade of the sixth century.<sup>19</sup> Descriptions of alchemical methods in Shangqing sources, however, include traits clearly related to meditation: in this tradition, the symbolic features of Waidan become one of several available supports for visualization practices. This emphasis on the inner aspects of the alchemical work is an anticipation of traits that later characterize Neidan.<sup>20</sup>

Of equal importance for the history of alchemy is the continuity between the Taiqing scriptures and the Shangqing Waidan sources. Language, techniques, and rites are largely the same. This suggests that earlier texts were modified upon incorporation in the Shangqing corpus, leaving the original core untouched (for two examples see below the section “Texts”). With the possible exception of the high number of elixir ingredients, in fact, no Waidan technique can be identified as typical of Shangqing; the heating process used in its

<sup>18</sup> Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing dans l'histoire du taoïsme*, 1:35–48.

<sup>19</sup> Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching,” 143–51.

<sup>20</sup> Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching,” 169–78; Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing*, 1:176–80; Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 140–47. See also the essay no. 2 in this volume.

## Early Taoist Meditation and the Origins of Internal Alchemy\*

Originally published with the same title in Benjamin Penny, ed., *Daoism in History: Essays in Honour of Liu Ts'un-yan*, 21–58 (London: Routledge, 2006).

According to one of the scriptures belonging to the Taiqing 太清, or Great Clarity, tradition, after an adept receives alchemical texts and oral instructions from his master, he withdraws to a mountain or a secluded place to perform purification practices. He establishes the ritual area, delimits it with talismans for protection against demons and wild animals, and builds the Chamber of the Elixirs (*danshi* 丹室) at the center of this protected space. To begin compounding the elixir, he chooses a favorable day using traditional methods of calendrical computation. When all ritual, spatial, and temporal conditions are fulfilled, he may at last kindle the fire. Now he offers food and drink to three deities, asking that they grant the successful compounding of the elixir:

小兆臣某共誠惟大道君，老君，太和君。哀。小兆臣某貪生藥，道某令藥不飛不亡，皆使伏火。藥已好善，隨手變化，黃白悉伏，服藥飛仙，朝於紫宮，命長無極，得至真人。

This petty man, (*name of the adept*), verily and entirely devotes his thoughts to the Great Lord of the Dao, Lord Lao, and the

\* This study develops some themes examined in the final chapter of my *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*. I am grateful to John Lagerwey, whose comments on my previous work have led me to readdress some issues, and to Carl Bielefeldt, Monica Esposito, and Elena Valussi for their criticism and suggestions. Responsibility for any errors is entirely mine.

Lord of Great Harmony. Alas! This petty man, (*name of the adept*), covets the Medicine of Life! Lead him so that the Medicine will not volatilize and be lost, but rather be fixed by fire! Let the Medicine be good and efficacious, let the transmutations take place without hesitation, and let the Yellow and the White be entirely fixed! When he ingests the Medicines, let him fly as an immortal, have audience at the Purple Palace (Zigong), live an unending life, and become a realized man (*zhenren*)!<sup>1</sup>

The Great Lord of the Dao (Da Daojun 大道君), Lord Lao (Laojun 老君, Laozi in his divine aspect), and the Lord of Great Harmony (Taihe jun 太和君) are not mentioned together in other alchemical texts. They are, instead, referred to as a group of deities in an early manual on Taoist meditation, the *Central Book of Laozi* (*Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經), devoted to the main gods who reside in the heavens and within the human being. One of the sections of this work contains the following passage:

道君者，一也，皇天上帝，中極北辰中央星是也。乃在九天之上，萬丈之巔，太淵紫房宮中。衣五色之衣，冠九德之冠，上有太清元氣，雲曜五色。華蓋九重之下，老子，太和侍之左右。

The Lord of the Dao is the One (Yi). He is the Emperor on High of the August Heaven (Huangtian shangdi) and the central star of the Northern Asterism of the Central Ultimate. He resides above the Nine Heavens, ten thousand *zhang* on high, within the Palace of the Purple Chamber (Zifang gong) in the Great Abyss. He is clothed in five-colored garments and wears the Headgear of the Nine Virtues. Above him is the five-colored glow of the cloudy Breaths (*qi*) of Great Clarity. Underneath a nine-layered flowery canopy, Laozi and Great Harmony attend upon him at his left and his right.

The text continues by giving details on the Lord of the Dao, including his names, bodily features, garments, spouse (the Jade Woman of Mysterious Radiance of Great Yin, Taiyin Xuanguang Yunü 太陰玄光玉女), and location within the human being—under another

<sup>1</sup> *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue* (Instructions on the Book of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor; DZ 885), 1.3a. See also above, p. 7 note 8.

flowery canopy within another Palace of the Purple Chamber, i.e., the gallbladder. His two attendants, Lord Lao and Great Harmony, are described in the next two sections of the *Central Book*.<sup>2</sup>

It might seem unusual that an alchemical text and a text on meditation mention the same gods. However, this and other shared details in the passages quoted above—the mentions of the heaven of Great Clarity and of the Purple Palace, or Palace of the Purple Chamber—are less surprising if one considers that both texts circulated at the same time, the third century, in the same area, the Jiangnan 江南 region south of the lower Yangzi River. These analogies invite us to look more closely at the relation between alchemy and meditation, and especially at the role played by meditation practices in the transition from Waidan 外丹, or External Alchemy, to Neidan 內丹, or Internal alchemy.

#### FROM WAIDAN TO NEIDAN

The influence of meditation in the shift from Waidan to Neidan has been noted in several studies, and the importance of the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) tradition of Taoism has often been emphasized in this context. Several decades ago, Michel Strickmann noticed that Shangqing moved the focus of alchemy from the actual compounding of elixirs to “a sequence of symbolic procedures within a diffused frame of pharmacochemical reference.”<sup>3</sup> A few years later, Isabelle Robinet observed repeated instances of alchemical imagery in her masterful work on Shangqing literature, and suggested that Shangqing meditation practices not only played a crucial role in the rise of Neidan, but actually anticipated several of its features.<sup>4</sup> Later,

<sup>2</sup> *Laozi zhongjing*, sec. 5–7. The Purple Chamber is identified as the gallbladder in sec. 37. Here and below I refer to section numbers in the text of the *Laozi zhongjing* found in *Yunji qiqian* (Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds; DZ 1032), j. 18–19. The independent edition in the Taoist Canon (DZ 1168) is virtually identical to the text in the *Yunji qiqian* but is entitled *Laojun zhongjing* 老君中經 (Central Book of Lord Lao).

<sup>3</sup> Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T’ao Hung-ching,” 169–78; the quotation is from p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing dans l’histoire du taoïsme*, 1:176–80.

the relation between meditation and Neidan was also examined in studies by Sakade Yoshinobu and by Katō Chie. While Sakade has clarified how Neidan compares to the two main types of Taoist meditation (visualization of inner gods and “inner contemplation” or *neiguan* 內觀),<sup>5</sup> Katō has shown that some aspects of the Neidan practices are foreshadowed in a text as early as the *Central Book of Laozi*.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, I examine the role played by meditation in relation to the main feature in the development of Chinese alchemy: the shift of emphasis from the world of gods and demons to the impersonal principles that regulate the functioning of the cosmos and the human being. The broad traits of this shift may be formulated as follows. The earliest extant Waidan sources, belonging to the Taiqing tradition, are distinguished by two related features. First, the elixirs are compounded not only to acquire longevity and immortality, but also to receive the protection of divinities and to ward off demons and other dangers. Second, these sources describe the alchemical process without using the abstract emblems of correlative cosmology. The few instances of methods based on cosmological configurations are not predominant in the Taiqing sources as a whole, whose recipes include a large variety of ingredients; when they do occur, they reproduce simple patterns—either Yin and Yang, or the five agents (*wuxing* 五行)—and do not make it possible to represent cosmological configurations that succeed one another and the hierarchical relations that occur among them, as do later alchemical sources, both Waidan and Neidan. There is, in fact, no intent of using the alchemical process for this purpose.

Early works on meditation share both of these features. They are primarily concerned with the divine world existing both in the outer heavens and within the human being. Accordingly, they require practitioners to visualize the inner gods, feed them with essences and breaths (*qi*) found in their own bodies, and invoke them so that they stay with them and enable them to communicate with the gods of the outer pantheon. Like the Taiqing sources, moreover, the early meditation texts do not discuss the different cosmological states that enable the manifestation of the Dao in the cosmos, and do not use the system

<sup>5</sup> Sakade Yoshinobu, “Zui-Tō jidai ni okeru fukutan to naikan to naitan.”

<sup>6</sup> Katō Chie, “Rōshi chūkyō to naitan shisō no genryū.”

of correlative cosmology to frame the practices that they describe or to explicate their meaning.

The shift of emphasis mentioned above happened in parallel with the rise to prominence of the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契, or *Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the Book of Changes* (hereafter *Cantong qi*), the main scripture of Chinese alchemy. I will discuss later in the present study the date and the main features of this work. Here it is sufficient to note that, under its influence, a large number of works, dating from the Tang period onward, describe the compounding of an “external” or “internal” elixir based on two emblematic substances, True Lead (*zhenqian* 真鉛) and True Mercury (*zhenhong* 真汞). With a remarkable innovation in language and in the underlying concepts, the new Waidan and Neidan texts associate the elixir and its ingredients (metals and minerals in the former case, the primary constituents of the human being in the latter) with cosmological principles, and systematically ground the alchemical process in patterns of emblems that include Yin and Yang, the five agents, the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the celestial stems and the earthly branches, the twelve pitch-pipes, the twenty-eight lunar mansions, and so forth. These emblems relate the alchemical process to the major features of the cosmos—especially its temporal cycles—and, more importantly, to represent the different cosmological states that a practitioner is supposed to trace in a sequence contrary to their hierarchical order, with the purpose of tracing their origin. In this form of Waidan, the ritual features of the earlier Taiqing tradition are discounted; and in Neidan, there is no more need to rely on the deities of inner pantheon in order to approach those of the outer heavens. In the new traditions of both Waidan and Neidan, in fact, gods and demons are virtually forgotten.<sup>7</sup>

The similar shift of emphasis that occurs in outer and inner practices from the Tang period onward is related, therefore, to the adoption of a new doctrinal model that underlies both. This shows that the Neidan tradition cannot be seen merely as an “inner” version

<sup>7</sup> On the two varieties of Waidan outlined above see the essay no. 1 in the present book. The “three” in the title of the *Cantong qi* are explicated by several commentators as Taoism, the system of the *Book of Changes*, and alchemy; by others as Heaven, Earth, and humanity.

of Waidan, or as created *ex nihilo* after the *Cantong qi* had paved the way for the development of a new form of Waidan. Taking this into account, the process that preceded the creation of a text like the *Cantong qi*, and the rise of the related internal practices, acquires more importance for understanding the nature and history of Neidan compared to its borrowings of language and terminology from Waidan.

### GREAT CLARITY

A brief outline of the Taiqing, or Great Clarity, tradition of Waidan will serve to identify the main features it shares with meditation. This tradition evolved in Jiangnan during the third and fourth centuries. Hagiographic and pseudo-historical sources place at its origin the revelations received by Zuo Ci 左慈 on Mount Tianzhu (Tianzhu shan 天柱山, in present-day eastern Anwei) at the end of the second century.<sup>8</sup> The three writings obtained by Zuo Ci form the core of the Taiqing legacy; they are the *Book of Great Clarity* (*Taiqing jing* 太清經), the *Book of the Nine Elixirs* (*Jiudan jing* 九丹經), and the *Book of the Golden Liquor* (*Jinye jing* 金液經). These texts describe the alchemical process as a sequence of stages that include the transmission of scriptures and oral instructions from master to disciple, the preliminary purification practices (*zhai* 齋), the establishment and protection of the ritual area, the choice of an auspicious time for starting the fire, the heating of the ingredients in the crucible, the offering of the elixir to the gods, and finally the ingestion of the elixir.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to James Robson for discussing the location of Mount Tianzhu with me. This name refers to different mountains, a feature related to the shifts of location of the southern sacred mountain (Nanyue 南嶽).

<sup>9</sup> The *Book of Great Clarity* survives in fragments quoted in the *Taiqing jing tianshi koujue* (Oral Instructions of the Celestial Master on the Book of Great Clarity; DZ 883), compiled not later than the mid-seventh century. The *Nine Elixirs* is included in the *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, a Waidan compilation written for Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–83). The *Golden Liquor* is extant in the *Baopu zi shenxian jinzhuo jing* (Book of the Golden Liquid of the Divine Immortals, by the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature; DZ 917) with a commentary dating from ca. 500 CE. On these and

## Creation and Its Inversion

### Cosmos, Human Being, and Elixir in the *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three)

Originally published with the same title in Anna Andreeva and Dominic Steavu, eds., *Transforming the Void: Embryological Discourse and Reproductive Imagery in East Asian Religions*, 186–211 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2015).

Like other cosmological sciences that have been developed in different times and places, Taoist alchemy is based on a set of fundamental principles that define the relation between two domains, which can be designated as the Absolute and the relative, the ultimate principle and its manifestation, Unity and multiplicity, the Dao and the “ten thousand things,” and in several other ways. While one might argue that this relation does not occur at all because nothing exists outside or beside the Absolute, those principles are used for two main purposes. The first is to explicate the bond between the Dao and the “ten thousand things”; the second is to frame self-cultivation and ritual practices that intend to lead adepts from the latter to the former domain, or to enable a whole community to benefit from the connection between the two domains usually established, on their behalf, by ordained priests. Once a tradition—in our case, the Taoist tradition—formulates those principles, they may be applied to a variety of cosmological sciences, in ways and to extents that may remarkably differ from one another: within the same tradition we find instances in which a cosmological science opens a way to surpass the boundaries of the cosmic domain, but also instances in which the outlook remains restricted to that domain, or even to particular aspects of it (for example, the human body).

With regard to alchemy—with ritual, the main cosmological science in Taoism—the most complete exposition of the fundamental principles and of their application is found in the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契, or *Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the Book of Changes* (hereafter *Cantong qi*). This work, traditionally attributed to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽 and traditionally dated to the second century CE, has provided the foundations for most lineages and forms of Taoist alchemy, which have placed it at the origins of their teachings and practices. Some of those forms and lineages pertain to Waidan 外丹, or External Alchemy, but the large majority pertain to Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy.<sup>1</sup>

As its title indicates, the *Cantong qi* is concerned with three main subjects, and joins them to one another into a single body of doctrine and practice. The first subject is principles of ontology and cosmology, mainly formulated on the basis of the *Yijing* 易經, or *Book of Changes*. The second subject is the highest state of realization, identified as the Taoist way of “non-doing” (*wuwei* 無為) in accordance with the principles of the *Daode jing* 道德經, or *Book of the Way and its Virtue*. The third subject is alchemy, defined as the conjunction of True Yin and True Yang, which are represented by alchemical images—True Mercury and True Lead, respectively—and by several other emblems. Concerning the first two subjects, the *Cantong qi* gives a synopsis of the doctrinal principles; concerning the third one, it outlines the main features of its own cosmological science, namely alchemy.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I will not discuss here issues of authorship and dating of the *Cantong qi*. On these questions, and on the relation of the text to Waidan and Neidan, see the Introduction in my *The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi*, esp. 11–27 and 53–63.

<sup>2</sup> The three subjects are reflected in the title of the *Cantong qi* and are mentioned in its verses. In sec. 84, the *Cantong qi* refers to the *Yijing*, the Taoist teachings on “non-doing,” and alchemy (“the work with the fire of the furnace”), and then adds: “These three Ways stem from one, / and together yield one path.” Sec. 87 states: “I have tendered three twigs, / but their branches and stalks are bound to one another: / they come forth together but have different names, / as they all stem from one gate.” On the title of the *Cantong qi* see Meng Naichang, *Zhouyi cantong qi kaobian*, 62–65 and 97–98, and Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, 2–5. — In addition to Lead and Mercury, emblems that represent the conjunction of Yin and Yang

In this way, the *Cantong qi* proposes an integral description of doctrine and practice, including both the principles and their application. Within this framework, it uses—like Taoism does in general—multiple sets of concepts and symbolic forms in order to explain how the absolute principle, or the Dao, manifests itself through a series of consecutive stages that lead from Non-Being to multiplicity, and in order to devise a practice that traces those stages in a reverse sequence. In this study, I present passages of the *Cantong qi* that are concerned with these subjects. These passages answer three main questions. First, how does the Dao, the absolute and unchangeable (*chang* 常, “constant”) principle, give birth to the world in which we live, which is ruled by relativity and change? Second, how is the human being generated? Finally, how does a cosmological science, namely alchemy, provide the means to accomplish the return from the relative to the absolute domain, and to realize their fundamental identity? As we shall see, the views of the *Cantong qi* concerning the first question serve to answer the other two questions.

### GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The main points of the doctrine of the *Cantong qi* on the relation between the Dao and the cosmos are stated in the initial verses of the text:

乾坤者易之門戶，衆卦之父母。坎離匡郭，運轂正軸。牝牡四卦，以為橐籥。

“Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ are the door and the gate of change,”  
the father and the mother of all hexagrams.

Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are the inner and the outer walls,  
they spin the hub and align the axle.

Female and male, these four trigrams  
function as a bellows and its nozzles.<sup>3</sup>

include Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ among the trigrams; the dyads Water/Fire and Wood/Metal among the five agents; *wu* 戊 and *ji* 己 among the celestial stems; and 5 as formed by 4+1 and by 3+2 among numbers.

<sup>3</sup> *Cantong qi*, sec. 1. Quotations of the *Cantong qi* in this study are drawn from my translation cited in note 1 above and follow its numbering of

It should be noted, to begin, that although their names belong to the vocabulary of the *Yijing*, it would not be possible to understand the functions that Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li perform in a work like the *Cantong qi*, and in Taoist alchemy in general, as long as they are seen merely as trigrams or hexagrams. In the perspective of the *Cantong qi*, Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li are formless principles that illustrate how the Dao generates the cosmos and manifests itself in it. The corresponding trigrams and hexagrams are images (*xiang* 象, symbolic forms) that represent those principles.

In this view, Qian and Kun designate the two primary modes taken on by the Dao as it generates the relative domain and manifests itself in it. As we read in two famous statements of the *Yijing*:

大哉乾元，萬物資始。 . . . 至哉坤元，萬物資生。

Great indeed is Qian, the Origin! The ten thousand things owe their beginning to him. . . . Perfect indeed is Kun, the Origin! The ten thousand things owe their birth to her.<sup>4</sup>

Qian is the active (“creative”) principle, the essence, Yang, and Heaven. Kun is the passive (“receptive”) principle, the substance, Yin, and Earth. As they join to give birth to the cosmos, Qian entrusts his creative power to Kun, and Kun, impregnated by Qian, brings creation to accomplishment. In the symbolic representation by the corresponding trigrams, the Yang of Qian moves into Kun, and, in response, the Yin of Kun moves into Qian: Qian ☰ becomes Li ☲, and Kun ☷ becomes Kan ☵. The cosmos and all entities and phenomena within it are generated through the continuous enactment of this process. Therefore, as we read in the poem of the *Cantong qi* quoted above, Qian and Kun are “the door and the gate” through which change comes forth, and they are “the father and the mother” of all other emblems that represent change.

Having been generated through the conjunction of Qian and Kun, the other two main trigrams, namely Kan and Li, illustrate the opera-

sections. The first verse of the present poem derives from the “Appended Sayings” (“Xici” 繫辭) of the *Yijing*, B.5.

<sup>4</sup> *Yijing*, “Commentary on the Judgement” (“Tuanzhuan 彖傳”) on the hexagrams Qian ☰ and Kun ☷. It seems impossible, in this and similar cases, to use the gender-neutral pronoun “it” to refer to Qian and Kun, as they are by no means “neutral.”

tion of the two primary principles within the cosmic domain. Since Kan and Li embrace the essences of Qian and Kun, represented by the inner lines of the respective trigrams, according to the poem translated above they provide “inner and outer walls” to Qian and Kun: the Yin principle (Kan ☵) harbors the True Yang of Qian (its inner solid line), and the Yang principle (Li ☲) harbors the True Yin of Kun (its inner broken line).

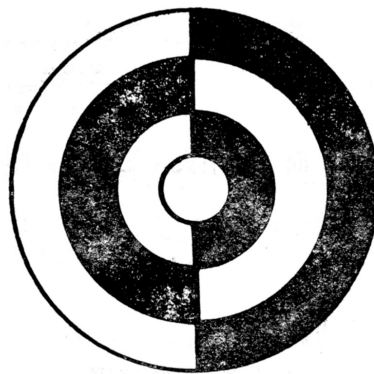


Fig. 8. “Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are the inner and the outer walls.”

In the fourth verse, the same view is illustrated with another image, which adds a further detail. If the two sets of walls, inner and outer, are shaped as joined semicircles, they form a wheel (see fig. 8).<sup>5</sup> The Emptiness from which existence comes forth is the central hub; Qian and Kun are the axle passing through the hub, which holds the wheel in position; and the wheel with its spokes represents the compass of space and the cycles of time governed by Kan and Li. The wheel, therefore, is the frame (*ti* 體) that enables Emptiness to operate

<sup>5</sup> This wheel is used in the *Taiji tu* 太極圖 (Chart of the Great Ultimate), where it represents the stage of the division of the One into the Two. It is also equivalent to—in fact, the precursor of—the well-known “fish-like” Yin-Yang emblem, where the black half contains a white dot (corresponding to the inner line of Kan ☵, “Yang within Yin”), and the white half contains a black dot (corresponding to the inner line of Li ☲, “Yin within Yang”).

(or “function,” *yong* 用) throughout space and time. As several commentators have remarked, the *Cantong qi* here uses the same images found in the *Daode jing*: “Thirty spokes share one hub: wherein there is nothing lies the function of the carriage. . . . Therefore in what is there lies the benefit; in what is not there lies the function.”<sup>6</sup>

Using another image, different in appearance but analogous in nature, the final two verses compare Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li to a bellows and its nozzles. The bellows (Qian and Kun) is empty but sends forth its breath through the nozzles (Kan and Li). This image also alludes to a passage in the *Daode jing*, which refers to the empty center from which existence comes forth by saying: “The space between Heaven and Earth—is it not like a bellows? As empty, it is never exhausted; as it moves, it continues to pour.”<sup>7</sup>

### CREATING THE WORLD

The poem quoted above describes cosmogony as a continuous process through which the Dao generates the world by means of Qian and Kun and operates throughout it by means of Kan and Li. Qian and Kun are placed at the center of creation, Kan and Li rule on space and time. In Taoist doctrine, however, the creation of the world is also described as the final result of a sequence of stages. The Dao, the absolute principle, generates (*sheng* 生) these stages not out of “nothing,” but out of itself. Non-Being (*wu* 無) first determines itself as Being (*you* 有), whose primary property is Unity (*yi* 一). While this Unity is not manifested as such, it is at the origins of multiplicity: it contains within itself all of the possibilities of manifestation. Through the continuous conjunction of Qian and Kun, the male and the female principles, the “ten thousand things” (*wanwu* 萬物, multiplicity) are born.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Daode jing* 11. The wheel and the carriage are two of the most recurring images in the *Cantong qi*; see *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, 45–47.

<sup>7</sup> *Daode jing* 5.

<sup>8</sup> This view is meaningful only from the perspective of the last stage, since space and time—which provide the conditions for any “stage” to occur—only emerge at the end of the sequence. “In the Dao there is no ‘after’ or ‘before’” 夫道無後先; “[In the Dao] there is no interval between ‘this’ and ‘that’, or between ‘now’ and ‘the past’” 無彼此今昔之間. *Xiyi zhimi lun*

## Form, Formlessness, and Ways of Liberation in Taoism

Originally published as “The Notion of ‘Form’ and the Ways of Liberation in Daoism” in *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 14 (2004): 95–130. The volume contained essays written in memory of Isabelle Robinet (1932–2000).

Several texts belonging to different traditions of Neidan 內丹 (Internal Alchemy) mention the term “refining the form” (*lianxing* 煉形, 鍊形). The *Transmission of the Dao from Zhongli Quan to Lü Dongbin: An Anthology* (*Zhong Lü chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集; probably tenth century) devotes an entire section to this subject, stating that “in order to obtain a long life free from death, you should refine your form so that you can dwell in the world, preserving yourself for one kalpa after the other.”<sup>1</sup> Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1306) writes that “the Golden Liquor (*jinye* 金液) refines the form and the Jade Talisman (*yufu* 玉符) protects the spirit; when form and spirit are both wondrous, they are one with the Dao and merge with Reality.”<sup>2</sup> A work containing brief explanations of several dozen Neidan terms, the *Questions and Answers on the Golden Elixir* (*Jindan wenda* 金丹問答; ca. 1260), defines “refining the form” saying that “it means refining the form and transmuting it into breath (*qi*), refining breath

<sup>1</sup> *Zhong Lü chuandao ji*, in *Xiuzhen shishu* (Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality; DZ 263), 16.6b.

<sup>2</sup> *Zhonghe ji* (Centrality and Harmony: An Anthology; DZ 249), 1.6a. “Jade Talisman” appears in several terms related to meditation (for an example, see note 64 below); in Neidan, as Monica Esposito has suggested (personal communication), it refers to practices related to one’s inner nature (*xing* 性), while “Golden Liquor” refers to practices related to one’s physical existence (*ming* 命). On the phrase “form and spirit are both wondrous” see *infra*.

and transmuting it into spirit (*shen*), and refining spirit and joining with the Dao.”<sup>3</sup>

The immediate precursors of these and other texts are the Tang works on Taoist meditation that include “refining the form” within a sequence of practices that later would also become typical of Neidan. The *Commentary to the Book on Concentration and Contemplation* (*Dingguan jingzhu* 定觀經注) describes the sequence as follows:

夫得道之人，凡有七候。一者心得定易，覺諸塵漏。二者宿疾普銷，身心輕爽。三者填天損，還年復命。四者延數萬歲，名曰仙人。五者鍊形為氣，名曰真人。六者鍊氣成神，名曰神人。七者鍊神合道，名曰至人。

For the person who attains the Dao, there are altogether seven stages:

- (1) Attaining concentration and ease of mind: one becomes aware of all impurities.
- (2) Eliminating illnesses derived from former lives: body and mind are light and lively.
- (3) Preventing untimely death and other harms: one reverts to youth and returns to one’s mandate (*ming*).
- (4) Reaching a longevity of ten thousand years: this is called being an Immortal (*xianren*).
- (5) Refining the form into breath (*qi*): this is called being a Realized Man (*zhenren*).
- (6) Refining breath and achieving spirit: this is called being a Divine Man (*shenren*).
- (7) Refining spirit and joining with the Dao: this is called being an Accomplished Man (*zhiren*).<sup>4</sup>

The last three stages in this sequence are the same as those mentioned in the *Questions and Answers*. They are familiar to all students of Neidan, with the only difference that most Neidan texts usually mention the refining of essence (*jing* 精), instead of form, into breath—a point to which we shall return.

As a doctrinal concept and a technical term, however, the history of “refining the form” begins long before the Tang period. Its origins

<sup>3</sup> *Jindan wenda*, in *Xiuzhen shishu*, 10.10a. The author of this lexicon is Xiao Tingzhi 蕭廷芝 (fl. 1260–64).

<sup>4</sup> *Dingguan jing* (DZ 400), 6b-7a.

lie in the views regarding the relationship between the Dao and the world of multiplicity, which various Chinese traditions have formulated in different ways and adapted to different contexts. Since early times, as we shall see, it was recognized that “form” is one of the key concepts for defining that relationship. Taoists have continued to investigate those ideas throughout history and have associated them to a variety of ways of liberation.

To understand this complex of ideas, the first point to consider is the difference between *xing* 形, or “form,” and *ti* 體, the Chinese term that is closest to the English word “body.” Although *xing* is sometimes translated as “body,” the early definition of *xing* as “image” (*xiang* 象), dating from around 100 CE, shows that this word does not denote the physical body.<sup>5</sup> That a difference between *xing* (“form”) and *ti* (“body”) exists is also suggested by the fact that, in Neidan and in other practices, one “refines the form” (*lianxing*) or “nourishes the form” (*yangxing* 養形). These two compounds are not attested with *ti* instead of *xing*: one neither “refines the body” nor “nourishes the body.” Another significant detail is that *xing*, as part of the compound *lianxing*, is not interchangeable with other words whose meanings include “form,” such as *rong* 容, *fan* 範, *yang* 樣, *zhuang* 狀, *ge* 格, or *se* 色.

To introduce our discussion, we might say that while *ti*, or “body,” refers specifically to the material frame and the physical substance of human beings and other living or inanimate entities, *xing*, or “form,” identifies and defines the single entities as such and distinguishes them from (but also relates them to) one another. The association of “form” and “name” in the compound *xingming* 形名 shows that forms play a function similar to the one played by names in defining entities as individual objects. The relation between form and individuality—with all limitations of individuality, including its inevitable final disappearance—is clearly implied, and often

<sup>5</sup> See *Shuowen jiezi* (Elucidations of the Signs and Explications of the Graphs; 100 CE), 9A.7b, which states that “the form is an image” (*xing*, *xiang* 形, 象也). We shall return to this definition below. The term *ti* instead is defined in the same text, 4B.7b, as “what gathers the twelve dependent parts” (*ti*, *zong shi'er shu ye* 體, 總十二屬也). Duan Yucai’s 段玉裁 (1735–1815) commentary lists the twelve parts in four groups: (1) top of the head, face, and chin; (2) shoulders, spine, and pelvic bone; (3) arms, forearms, and hands; (4) thighs, tibiae, and feet.

explicitly stated, in many of the sources quoted in the present study. Forms are changeable and are bound to decay; thus they must be transcended in order to attain the Dao, which is “formless” (*wuxing* 無形) and therefore is the only permanent or “constant” (*chang* 常) reality.<sup>6</sup>

### DAO AND FORMS

The classical statement on form in the Chinese tradition is found in the “Appended Sayings” (“Xici” 繫辭) to the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), which says:

形而上者謂之道，形而下者謂之器。

What is above the form is called the Dao; what is below the form is called an object.<sup>7</sup>

*Qi* 器, literally meaning “vessel,” is used in this sentence as a synonym of *wu* 物, “thing”: it denotes any entity that exists in the world of form, distinguished from the Dao which is above form.<sup>8</sup> The same term occurs in another well-known statement, found in the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), which Taoist authors often quote to illustrate the relation of form to formlessness:

<sup>6</sup> On “forms and names” see Yates, *Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huanglao, and Yin-Yang in Han China*, 23–25. Yates points out the “metaphysical foundation” of this concept as found in the Mawangdui manuscript entitled *Jingfa* 經法 (Canon: Law), which states that forms and names emerge when Non-Being generates Being and then the particular entities.

<sup>7</sup> *Yijing*, “Xici,” A.12. See also trans. Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 323. Another passage in the same text, A.10, states: “[What has] a form is called an object” (*xing, nai wei zhi qi* 形，乃謂之器); see Wilhelm, 318.

<sup>8</sup> Chan Wing-tsit remarks that *qi* “is a technical philosophical term that should not be understood in its popular meanings of an instrument, an implement, or a vessel, or be distorted to mean matter, substance, or material entity. Philosophically it means *a concrete or definite object in contrast to the Tao which has neither spatial restriction nor physical form*. It also includes systems and institutions, or any thing or affair that has a concrete form” (Chan Wing-tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 784; emphasis mine).

埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。

One molds clay to make a vessel: wherein there is nothing lies the function of the vessel.<sup>9</sup>

The “vessel” here is an object whose function is to provide a lodge for formlessness. As we shall see, this is one of the main functions of form mentioned in other texts.<sup>10</sup>

The association between the statements of the *Book of Changes* and the *Daode jing* quoted above is illustrated by Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933). In his commentary to this passage of the *Daode jing*, he cites the *Book of Changes* to explain how form belongs to the domain of the objects instead of the domain of the Dao:

凡萬物從無而生，眾形由道而立。先道而後形。道在形之上，形在道之下。故自形而上謂之道，自形而下謂之器。形雖處道器兩畔之際，形在器上不在道也。既有形質可為器用，故云形而下者謂之器。

The ten thousand things are all generated from Non-Being, and forms are all established from the Dao. First there is the Dao, then there is the form. The Dao is above the form, and the form is below the Dao. Therefore [the *Book of Changes* says:] “What is above the form is called the Dao; what is below the form is called an object.” Although the form dwells on the boundary (*ji*) between the domains of Dao and the objects, the form is above the objects (*zai qi shang*) and is not in the Dao (*bu zai dao*). Once there are form and matter can there be the use of an object. Therefore [the *Book of Changes*] says: “What is below the form is called an object.”<sup>11</sup>

As explained by Du Guangting, form is intermediate between the objects and the Dao, but belongs to the domain of the objects rather than the domain of the Dao. This provides a first explication of why form must be transcended in order to attain the Dao.

<sup>9</sup> *Daode jing* 11.

<sup>10</sup> The term *qi* is also found in *Daode jing* 28: “When simplicity scatters there are the objects” (*pu san ze wei qi* 樸散則為器).

<sup>11</sup> Du Guangting, *Daode zhenjing guangsheng yi* (Extended Interpretation of the Emperor’s Exegesis of the *True Book of the Way and Its Virtue*; DZ 725), 11.18a.

The main scripture on the doctrinal foundations of Chinese alchemy, the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the *Book of Changes*; hereafter *Cantong qi*), also refers to the sentence of the *Daode jing* quoted above. Exploiting the dual acceptations of the words *wu* 無 (Non-Being, lit., “there-being-nothing”) and *qi* 器 (object, lit., “vessel”), the *Cantong qi* rephrases the sentence of the *Daode jing* into an explicit statement on the origin of Being from Non-Being, saying:

以無制有，器用者空。

It is by Non-Being that Being is produced:  
the function of a vessel consists in its emptiness.<sup>12</sup>

In his commentary to this sentence, Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290-ca. 1368) quotes again the same passage of the *Book of Changes*, saying:

無與有為兩者，何也？太極之分有先天有後天。何為先天？形而上者謂之道。以有入無也。何為後天？形而下者謂之器。從無入有也。

Why is there the dyad of Non-Being and Being? With the division of the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) there are the precelestial (*xiantian*) and the postcelestial (*houtian*).<sup>13</sup> What is the precelestial? “What is above the form is called the Dao.” This refers to using Being to enter into Non-Being. What is the postcelestial? “What is below the form is called an object.” This refers to entering from Non-Being into Being.<sup>14</sup>

Chen Zhixu relates “what is above the form” to the principle of Non-Being, and “what is below the form” to the principle of Being. He adds that what is above the form pertains to precelestial and what is below the form pertains to the postcelestial, i.e., the states before and after the generation of the cosmos.

<sup>12</sup> *Cantong qi*, sec. 5; Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi*, 71 (trans.) and 134–35 (notes).

<sup>13</sup> This sentence does not refer to the division of the Great Ultimate into Yin and Yang, but to its emergence as marking the division between the pre-cosmic and the cosmic domains (“precelestial” and “postcelestial”)

<sup>14</sup> *Zhouyi cantong qi zhujie* (Commentary to the *Cantong qi*), *zhang* 2.

## Views of Time in Chinese Alchemy

Originally published with the same title in Livia Kohn, ed., *Time in Daoist Practice: Cultivation and Calculation*, 247–67 (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2021).

Time plays a major role in the doctrines and practices of both main branches of Chinese alchemy, namely Waidan 外丹, or External Alchemy (documented from the mid-second century BCE), and Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy (documented from the early eighth century CE). Within both branches, time is understood in two main aspects. First, the cosmos is generated by the Dao in a sequence of stages. Time here is meant in a purely metaphoric sense: as these stages precede the emergence of time, they occur in a state of timelessness. Time as we ordinarily perceive it begins at the conclusion of that sequence. Under this second aspect, time is manifested in the cyclical alternation of Yin and Yang, visible for instance in the succession of daytime and nighttime during the day, of the moon phases during the month, and of the four seasons during the year.

In a significant portion of Waidan, and in virtually the whole of Neidan, both aspects of time are described and represented by classical Taoist concepts and by emblems drawn from the system of Chinese cosmology. As they do in other Taoist traditions,<sup>1</sup> these concepts and emblems represent “regressive” or “upward” sequences, in which the metaphoric time stages are traced backwards (*ni* 逆, or “inverting the course”), as well as “progressive” or “downward” sequences, which reproduce the course of the ordinary time cycles (*shun* 順, or “following the course”). In the first case, the sequence of precosmic stages serves to frame models for the gradual reintegration of each stage into the previous one by means of Waidan or Neidan practices. In the

<sup>1</sup> See Schipper and Wang, “Progressive and Regressive Time Cycles in Taoist Ritual.”

second case, the daily, monthly, and yearly time cycles, as well as their stages, provide templates for the “refining” (*lian* 煉) of natural substances (in Waidan) or of the person’s main components (in Neidan).

### “INVERTING THE COURSE”

Chinese alchemy uses two main numerical sequences to illustrate the stages through which the Dao generates the cosmos. Both sequences describe an ontology (by establishing a hierarchy among those stages) and a cosmogony (by representing them as succeeding one another in a metaphoric time scale).

#### *The Daode jing Sequence*

The first sequence is Dao → 1 → 2 → 3. Its *locus classicus* is the following passage of the *Daode jing* 道德經, or *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*, repeatedly quoted in both Waidan and Neidan works:

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

The Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things.<sup>2</sup>

According to one of several ways in which this passage has been understood within and outside Taoism,<sup>3</sup> One, Two, and Three respectively stand for the state of Unity, the emergence of Yin and Yang, and the product of their reconnection. The “ten thousand things” are the total sum of the entities and phenomena generated by the continuous reiteration of this three-stage process. In addition, the *Daode jing* sequence is also associated with three states or stages that the Dao takes on, or generates, in its self-manifestation: Dao → Spirit (*shen* 神) → Breath (*qi* 氣) → Essence (*jing* 精). After the last of these stages, the Dao gives birth to the cosmos through its own Essence.<sup>4</sup> While all these stages are contained within the Dao, their

<sup>2</sup> *Daode jing* 42.

<sup>3</sup> On the different readings of this passage see Robinet, “Un, Deux, Trois: Les différentes modalités de l’Un et sa dynamique,” 198–203 and *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> *Daode jing* 21.

completion marks the shift from the precelestial to the postcelestial domains (*xiantian* 先天 to *houtian* 後天) and the emergence of ordinary time.

### *The Yijing Sequence*

The second sequence used in Chinese alchemy is [Dao →] 1 → 2 → 4.<sup>5</sup> Its *locus classicus* is a passage in the “Xici” 繫辭 (“Appended Sayings”) appendix of the *Yijing* 易經, or *Book of Changes*:

是故，易有太極，是生兩儀，兩儀生四象。

Therefore in the *Changes* there is the Great Ultimate (*taiji*, Unity). This generates the two principles (*liangyi*). The two principles generate the four images (*sixiang*).<sup>6</sup>

This sequence—which in the *Yijing* continues with the generation of the eight trigrams and the sixty-four hexagrams—intends to show that the modes of change represented by lines, trigrams, and hexagrams are issued from the state of Unity and are contained within it: the different emblems portray the progressive unfolding of Unity into multiplicity.

In the traditional interpretation of the *Yijing*, the two principles are Pure Yang (—) and Pure Yin (--), while the four images are Minor Yang (==), Greater Yang (≡), Minor Yin (≡), and Greater Yin (≡). In alchemy, the “two” are understood in the same way, but they are usually called True Yin (*zhenyin* 真陰) and True Yang (*zhenyang* 真陽). The “four” are understood differently. Instead of representing the cyclical alternation of the growth and decrease of Yin and Yang (Minor Yang → Greater Yang → Minor Yin → Greater Yin), they are seen as different states or qualities of Yin and Yang in the precelestial and postcelestial domains. Precelestial True Yang is Qian ☰, and precelestial True Yin is Kun ☷. The other two images are Kan ☵ and Li ☲, which stand for postcelestial Yin containing True Yang and for postcelestial Yang containing True Yin, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> I place “Dao” within brackets because it is not explicitly mentioned in the passage quoted below. In the eyes of an alchemist, however, the whole sequence can only begin with the Dao.

<sup>6</sup> *Yijing*, “Xici,” sec. A.11.

### *Application to Alchemy*

Both sequences outlined above are used as templates for the “reversion to the origin” (*huanyuan* 還元, and several analogous terms) performed in both Waidan and Neidan. In the Waidan works that do not describe the alchemical process using the emblems of cosmology—which include all those datable until the end of the sixth century—the elixirs are usually compounded by heating the ingredients in a hermetically closed vessel that reproduces the inchoate state (*hundun* 混沌) prior to the emergence of the cosmos. The final product is often called the “essence” (*jing*) of the ingredients. A source dating from ca. 650 equates this essence to the one mentioned in *Daode jing* 21 as the seed of existence.<sup>7</sup> However, since many Waidan elixirs incorporate the Yin and Yang principles reverted to the state of unity, they include all three stages mentioned above.

The three stages of the *Daode jing* are even more important in Neidan. The classical Neidan practice consists in inverting the sequence of the generation of Spirit, Breath, and Essence. Accordingly—as shown in more detail below—the practice is divided into three main stages: (a) refining Essence into Breath; (b) refining Breath into Spirit; and (c) refining Spirit to return to Emptiness, or the Dao. Here the emblematic numbers 1, 2, and 3 also represent the progressive reduction of the components: 3 (Essence, Breath, Spirit) → 2 (Breath and Spirit) → 1 (Spirit) → 0 (Emptiness).

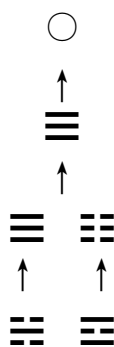


Fig. 10. The three stages of the alchemical process represented by means of trigrams of the *Yijing*.

<sup>7</sup> See Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*, 78.

With regard to the sequence of the *Yijing*, the main principles are equally shared by both Waidan and Neidan. Precelestial True Yang and True Yin are first extracted from the respective postcelestial counterparts, namely Kan ☵ and Li ☲, and their placements are exchanged. This restores Qian ☰ and Kun ☷, which are then joined to one another in order to reestablish their unity (also represented by Qian, which now stands for the stage prior to the division into Yin and Yang). This process can be represented as shown in fig. 10. A chart drawn by Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1306) makes clear that this representation of the alchemical process also applies to the refining of Essence, Breath, and Spirit in Neidan (see fig. 6, p. 60).

In all these cases, the elixir is a token of the successive states taken on by the Dao as it manifests itself in the cosmos, progressively embodied in a reverse order, including the state prior to their inception—a visible token in Waidan, an invisible one in Neidan. Certain Neidan masters emphasize an additional point. The backward movement of “inverting the course” is, in fact, an upward movement that leads the alchemist from the cosmos to the Dao by means of “doing” (*youwei* 有為, here meaning in the first place “doing” the practice). The alchemical work, however, is entirely accomplished only if the course is completed by means of an opposite movement of descent, performed by “non-doing” (*wuwei* 無為). Therefore, after the three stages of the alchemical practice have been completed, practitioners should return to the domain from which they had departed, and realize the unity and identity of Dao and cosmos, timelessness and time.

### “FOLLOWING THE COURSE”

The two “regressive” sequences seen above, based on the *Daode jing* and on the *Yijing*, show how, in Nathan Sivin’s words, “Chinese alchemical theories were essentially numerological.”<sup>8</sup> This feature is even more visible in the three main “progressive” sequences used in alchemy to illustrate the cyclical flow of time. Although, for the sake of clarity, I describe these sequences in a separate section, it should

<sup>8</sup> Sivin, “Chinese Alchemy and the Manipulation of Time,” 521; see also Robinet, “Role and Meaning of Numbers in Taoist Cosmology and Alchemy,” 66–72.

not be forgotten that in both Waidan and Neidan the “progressive” time cycles are embedded in the “regressive” time cycles.

These sequences became relevant to alchemy through the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契, or *Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the Book of Changes*, a work dating, in its present form, from not earlier than the mid-fifth century (and possibly from one or even two centuries later).<sup>9</sup> Under the influence of this work, which changed the history of Waidan and gave origin to Neidan, the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yijing*—and with them the whole basic repertoire of emblems and terminology used in Chinese cosmology—entered the field of alchemy. As far as we know, this occurred for Waidan approximately in the eighth century, the same period in which Neidan also begins to be documented in extant sources.

The cosmological portions of the *Cantong qi* describe three emblematic time cycles: the day, the month, and the year. In the view of the *Cantong qi*, these cycles manifest the operation of the One Breath (*yiqi* 一氣) of the Dao in the cosmos. All of them—but especially the third one, as shown in the next sections—became models of Waidan and Neidan practices.

### *Sixty Hexagrams: The Daily Cycle*

The first cycle concerns the thirty days of the lunar month.<sup>10</sup> During each day, the Yang principle prevails at daytime, from dawn to dusk, and the Yin principle prevails at nighttime, from dusk to dawn. The two parts of the day are ruled by a pair of hexagrams: a Yang hexagram presides over the first half, and a Yin hexagram presides over the second half. Accordingly, sixty of the sixty-four hexagrams are distributed among the thirty days of the month, following one another in the order in which they are arranged in the *Yijing* and are described in its “Hexagrams in Sequence” (“Xugua” 序卦) appendix. Zhun ䷵ and Meng ䷄, the first and second hexagrams after Qian and Kun, correspond to daytime and nighttime of the month’s first day. Jiji ䷲ and Weiji ䷶, the next-to-last and last hexagrams, correspond to daytime and nighttime of the month’s last day. The remaining four hexagrams,

<sup>9</sup> See Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi*, 11–26.

<sup>10</sup> *Cantong qi*, sec. 3 and 45. References are to the annotated translation in Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*.

## Discriminations in Cultivating the Dao

Liu Yiming (1734–1821) and His *Xiuzhen houbian*

Originally published with the same title in *AION (Annali dell'Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale")*, 37 (2015): 81–108.

Beyond the diversity of the respective authors' outlooks and concerns that they reflect, studies published in the past three or four decades have shown that Taoist Internal Alchemy, or Neidan 内丹, is by no means a uniform tradition. Its sources document varieties of Neidan that differ not only according to the degrees of "influence" by diverse legacies—Taoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, cosmology, medicine, and meditational or physiological techniques, to mention only the most important ones—but also according to the emphasis given on the exposition of doctrinal principles or on the performance of practices, and to the explications provided on the relation between doctrines and practices. Modern studies sometimes neglect to consider the differences among these approaches. Those differences, instead, were one of the main means used by masters and adepts to identify their place within the tradition as a whole.

The variety of approaches observed in the Neidan lineages and branches is impressive. This study is concerned with Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821), whose views on Neidan are, on the one hand, grounded in some the most deep-rooted aspects of this tradition, but also, on the other hand, so adverse to convention as to appear radical in their detachment from accepted standards. Yet, while Liu Yiming's teachings on Neidan are in many ways unique, his works represent one of the most important instances of an integral exposition of doctrine in the history of this tradition.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By "unique," I do not mean that Liu Yiming is the only representative of these views, but that he occupies a distinct place within the Neidan

Born in present-day Shanxi province, Liu Yiming was an eleventh-generation master of the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage and the founder of one of its north-western branches.<sup>2</sup> Having recovered from severe illness in his youth, he undertook extended traveling that led him to meet his two main masters, whom he calls Kangu Laoren 龕谷老人 (Old Man of the Kangu Valley) and Xianliu Zhangren 仙留丈人 (Great Man Who Rests in Immortality). In 1779, he visited the Qiyun 棲雲 mountains, in present-day Gansu, and decided to settle there. Although he continued to travel, he devoted most the second half of his life to teaching and writing. His works mainly consist of writings on Internal Alchemy and of commentaries on its major scriptures. Most of them are found in a collection entitled *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種 (Twelve Books on the Dao). In addition, he wrote little-known commentaries on Taoist and Buddhist texts, as well as works on medicine.<sup>3</sup>

This study focuses on one of the works included in the *Daoshu shi'er zhong*, entitled *Xiuzhen houbian* 修真後辨 or *Further Discriminations in the Cultivation of Reality*. As shown by its title, Liu Yiming meant this work to be a continuation of the *Xiuzhen bian-nan* 修真辨難 or *Discriminations on Difficult Points in the Cultivation of Reality*, written in 1798 and framed as a sequence of questions and answers—about 120 altogether—between him and a disciple. The *Houbian* bears no date, but was probably completed shortly after the *Biannan*. It takes up most of the subjects discussed in the earlier work, but arranges them into a series of twenty-six short essays, each of which is devoted to a subject relevant to Internal Alchemy.

tradition. There is, to mention a few examples, a clear continuity between his views and those of Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194–1229?) and Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1306), and to some extent those of Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290–ca. 1368), despite the different ways in which each of them has formulated his teachings. It may not be due to chance that the works of all these four masters include not only texts on Neidan, but also commentaries on the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue).

<sup>2</sup> The Longmen lineage claims descent from Qiu Chuji 邱處機 (1148–1227), who was a disciple of Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1113–70), the founder of the Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Reality) branch of Taoism.

<sup>3</sup> In spite of its title, the *Daoshu shi'er zhong* contains fifteen works in its 1819 edition, and twenty works in its 1880 edition.

Few other Chinese masters have illustrated the relation between Taoism and Internal Alchemy as clearly as Liu Yiming does in this work. Grafting Internal Alchemy onto the teachings of the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue) and of the later Taoist tradition, he shows how the way of the Golden Elixir can lead to the highest state of realization according to the Taoist principles. In this essay, I will attempt to present the main points of Liu Yiming's teaching as found in the *Xiuzhen houbian*, referred to below as *Discriminations*.<sup>4</sup>

### THE MEANING OF "DISCRIMINATIONS"

The word "discriminations" (*bian* 辨) in the titles of both works mentioned above is significant. Liu Yiming continuously reminds his readers of the need to use discernment in their way of seeing and in their practice of Internal Alchemy. For this reason, he repeatedly compares and contrasts different views and methods, pointing out why they can or cannot lead to complete realization. His intent in doing so is explained in his preface to *Discriminations*, which opens by quoting Zhuangzi 莊子:

莊子謂：「大道不稱，大辯不言。」

Zhuangzi says: "The Great Dao is not discussed, the great discriminations are not spoken."<sup>5</sup> (*Discriminations*, "Preface" 序, 1a)

<sup>4</sup> References to the *Xiuzhen houbian* and to other works by Liu Yiming quoted in the present study are to the 1880 Yihua tang 翼化堂 edition, reprinted with parts of the 1819 Huguo an 護國庵 edition in *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種 (Twelve Books on the Dao; Beijing: Zhongguo Zhongyiyao chubanshe, 1990). This book in turn is entirely reprinted in *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書 (Taoist Texts Outside the Canon), vol. 8. A complete translation of the *Xiuzhen houbian* is found in Liu Yiming, *Cultivating the Tao: Taoism and Internal Alchemy*. Passages quoted in the present study are drawn from that translation and include references to its numbering of chapters, but I do not provide references to page numbers.

<sup>5</sup> The quotation derives from *Zhuangzi* 莊子, ch. 2; see Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 44.

According to Zhuangzi, the Dao cannot be spoken and cannot be discussed. Liu Yiming as a consequence asks: "When no discussions or speeches are possible, how can there be discriminations?" However, he says, "false" discussions and speeches on the Dao harm the teaching, and he notes:

此予不得不強辨，以破其稱之不真；不得不細辨，以劈其言之有假。

I cannot refrain from making thorough discriminations in order to break what is not true in those discussions, and from making fine discriminations in order to crack what is false in those speeches. (Id., 1b)

At the same time, Liu Yiming is aware of the issues involved in distinguishing the "true" from the "false" and the "right" from the "wrong":

人亦稱矣，我亦稱矣；人亦言矣，我亦言矣；焉知人之稱者真乎，我之稱者不真乎？焉知我之稱者真乎，人之稱者不真乎？焉知人之言者假乎，我之言者不假乎？焉知我之言者假乎，人之言者不假乎？

Someone discusses and I also discuss; someone speaks and I also speak. How can I know that their discussions are true and my discussion is not true? Or that my discussion is true and their discussions are not true? How can I know that their speeches are false and my speech is not false? Or that my speech is false and their speeches are not false? (Id., 2b-3a)

His answer to these questions is exemplary:

誰真誰不真，誰假誰不假，是在不稱道，不言道者見而自知之，吾烏乎辨？

One knows what is true and what is not true, what is false and what is not false, only when one looks at all this by maintaining oneself in "not discussing the Dao" and "not speaking on the Dao." Now, could I make discriminations about this? (Id., 3a)

On the one hand, therefore, one should respond to the false, but on the other hand, true and false in discussions and speeches about the Dao may seem to be merely relative to one another. However,

when one maintains oneself in the state of “not discussing the Dao” and “not speaking on the Dao,” one does not ignore the difference between true and false; instead, one immediately knows the difference between them, with no need of discussions or speeches. Complying with his function of Taoist master from this perspective, Liu Yiming presents discussions and speeches based on discriminations, so that “students can gradually awaken to the Dao that cannot be discussed, and inwardly comprehend the Dao that cannot be spoken.”

### PRECELESTIAL AND POSTCELESTIAL DOMAINS

The first distinction made in *Discriminations* concerns the “precelestial” (*xiantian* 先天) and the “postcelestial” (*houtian* 後天) domains.<sup>6</sup> This distinction is essential to understand the whole of Liu Yiming’s discourse on Taoism and Internal Alchemy. The precelestial is the domain prior to the generation of the cosmos. The Dao does not manifest itself in this state, which pertains to the principle of Non-Being (*wu* 無). The postcelestial domain, instead, pertains to the principle of Being (*you* 有). This is the domain in which the individual creatures, objects, and phenomena live, exist, and occur; each of them is one of the “ten thousand things,” the innumerable transient forms generated by the formless Dao.

Although the precelestial domain is a state of non-manifestation, it harbors Essence (*jing* 精), Breath (*qi* 氣), and Spirit (*shen* 神), which are called the “three superior medicines” (*shangyao sanpin* 上藥三品) when they are seen as the ingredients of the Elixir. In the precelestial state, Essence, Breath, and Spirit are in their “original” (*yuan* 元) condition and are not provided with form:

心印經曰：「上藥三品，神與氣精。恍恍惚惚，杳杳冥冥，視之不見，聽之不聞。從無守有，頃刻而成。」曰恍惚，曰杳冥，曰有無，則為無形之物可知。

The *Xinyin jing* (Book of the Heart Seal) says:

The three superior medicines  
are Spirit, Breath, and Essence.

<sup>6</sup> *Xiantian* and *houtian* are often translated as Earlier Heaven and Later Heaven, or in similar ways. They refer, in fact, to the Opening of Heaven (*kaitian* 開天), the actual “instant” in which the cosmos is generated.

Vague and indistinct!  
 Dim and obscure!  
 Watching, you do not see them;  
 listening, you do not hear them.  
 From Non-Being they embrace Being,  
 and they are achieved in one instant.

The words “vague and indistinct,” “dim and obscure,” and “Being and Non-Being” show that the three medicines are something not provided with form.<sup>7</sup> (*Discriminations*, ch. 1, “Precelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit” 先天精氣神, 2a)

Original Essence, Original Breath, and Original Spirit cannot even be distinguished from one another: although they have three names, “in fact they are one.” Their foundation (*ti* 體) is their unity, and their division into three is their operation (*yong* 用):

雖名為三，其實是一。一者混元之義，三者分靈之謂。一是體，三是用。... 三而一，一而三。所謂上藥三品者用也，所謂具足圓成者體也。不得言三，亦不得言一。

They have three names, but in fact they are one. “One” refers to the inchoate Origin, “three” refers to the subdivision of the Numen.<sup>8</sup> “One” is the foundation (*ti*), “three” is the operation (*yong*). . . . They are three but it is one; it is one but they are three. When we speak of the three superior medicines, we mean the operation; when we speak of its being plentiful and whole, we mean the foundation. It cannot be called “three,” but they cannot be called “one” either. (Id., 1b)

<sup>7</sup> The verses “Vague and indistinct! Dim and obscure!” derive from *Daode jing* 21, which says of the Dao: “Vague and indistinct! Within there is something. Dim and obscure! Within there is an essence.” The verses “Watching, you do not see them; listening, you do not hear them” come from *Daode jing* 14: “Watching, you do not see it . . . Listening, you do not hear it . . . Grasping, you do not get it . . .” The verse “From Non-Being they embrace Being” (*cong wu shou you* 從無守有) reads “They preserve Non-Being and embrace Being” (*cun wu shou you* 存無守有) in the current versions of the *Xinyin jing*.

<sup>8</sup> In Taoist texts, “subdivision of the Numen” (*fenling* 分靈) indicates the partitioning of original Unity that occurs as the cosmos is generated. In this case, the partitioning of Unity results in the emergence of Essence, Breath, and Spirit.

## Appendix

### Taoist Alchemy: An Annotated Bibliography

Originally published in 2020 as “Chinese Alchemy” in the online *Oxford Bibliographies in Chinese Studies* ([www.oxfordbibliographies.com](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com)). Except for the initial “Introduction,” here omitted, this version still reflects the format and editorial guidelines of the original publication, particularly with regard to the number of studies that may be cited in each section (no more than eight, and no more than one or two in Chinese or Japanese). In the present version I have, nevertheless, added several studies by Taiwanese scholars that were omitted in the earlier version as well as a few works published after 2020.

#### I. GENERAL OVERVIEWS

In addition to the studies cited in the next two subsections, several general works on Taoism published by Chinese scholars contain chapters on Waidan and Neidan. Especially valuable are those found in Qing Xitai 卿希泰 and Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗, eds., *Zhongguo Daojiao tongshi* 中国道教通史 (5 vols., Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2020), and in Ren Jiyu 任继愈, ed., *Zhongguo Daojiao shi* 中国道教史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1990).

##### 1.1. *Waidan*

Waidan, or External Alchemy, is documented from the second century BCE, but virtually nothing is known about its historical origins. The largest number of extant sources—slightly more than one hundred—neglect to provide details on their provenance or present themselves as delivered by divinities, immortals, or beginners of religious traditions (including Zhang Daoling 張道陵, the originator of the Way of the Celestial Masters, or Tianshi dao 天師道). For this reason, until the present day a precise reconstruction of the development of Waidan has proved impossible, and scholars have instead focused on the identification and study of cognate groups of texts.

The most extended and best-documented works on Waidan as a whole in a Western language are Needham 1974 and Needham 1976, although the author's focus on the history of Chinese science often leads him to neglect the context in which alchemy was practiced. The relevant chapter in Ho 1985, written by one of Needham's main collaborators ("co-author" might in this case be a better term), summarizes the main findings and views presented in those works. Another overall view of Waidan is found in Pregadio 2000. In Chinese, two of the main general works are Meng 1993 and Rong 1998. Themes and issues in research on Waidan are the subjects of Sivin 1987 and Sivin 1990, authored by the Western scholar who has given perhaps the most substantial contributions to the understanding of the foundations of this branch of Chinese alchemy.

Ho, Peng Yoke. 1985. *Li, Qi and Shu: An Introduction to Science and Civilization in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

The chapter entitled "Chinese Alchemy" (pp. 171–217) consists of a summary of different sections of *Science and Civilisation in China*, vols. 5.III and 5.IV, which were first drafted by Ho Peng Yoke. (The original drafts are preserved in the archives of the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge, UK.)

Meng Naichang 孟乃昌, 1993. *Daojiao yu Zhongguo liandanshu* 道教与中国炼丹术 (Taoism and Chinese alchemy). Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe.

Probably still the most useful general overview of Waidan in Chinese. Contains descriptions of about thirty sources and about a dozen major Waidan methods.

Needham, Joseph. 1974. *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. 5: *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, part II: *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magisteries of Gold and Immortality*. With the collaboration of Lu Gwei-Djen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Includes the following sub-sections of section 33, "Alchemy and Chemistry": (a) "Introduction: The Historical literature"; (b) "Concepts, Terminology and Definitions"; (c) "The Metallurgical-Chemical Background; Identifications of Alchemical Processes"; (d) "The Physiological Background; Verifications of the Efficacy of the Elixirs."

Needham, Joseph, 1976. *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. 5: *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, part III: *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Historical Survey, from Cinnabar Elixirs to Synthetic Insulin*.

With the collaboration of Ho Ping-Yü [Ho Peng Yoke] and Lu Gwei-Djen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Includes sub-section (e) “The Historical Development of Alchemy and Early Chemistry” of section 33, “Alchemy and Chemistry,” with chapters ranging from the origins of alchemy to the rise of modern chemistry. Essay review by Nathan Sivin, “Discovery of Spagyric Invention,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41 (1981): 219–35.

Pregadio, Fabrizio. 2000. “The Elixirs of Immortality.” In Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook*, 165–95. Leiden: E.J. Brill. [Also published in the present volume, essay no. 1.]

A survey of Waidan arranged—like almost all other essays in this major reference work on Taoism—into four parts concerned with history, texts, “worldview,” and practices.

Rong Zhiyi 容志毅. 1998. *Zhongguo liandanshu kaolüe* 中国炼丹术考略 (A short study of Chinese External Alchemy). Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian.

Another valuable general overview of Waidan in Chinese. Contains chapters on the history of Waidan and its methods, terminology, and chemical features.

Sivin, Nathan. 1987. “Chinese Alchemy.” In Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1:186–90. New York and London: Macmillan.

An important synthesis of Waidan, centered on its aims and means, major issues in its history, and relation to Taoism and Chinese science. Also published in Lindsay Jones, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1:237–41 (second ed., New York and London: MacMillan, 2005).

Sivin, Nathan. 1990. “Research on the History of Chinese Alchemy.” In Z.R.W.M. von Martels, ed., *Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of the International Conference on the History of Alchemy at the University of Groningen, 17–19 April 1989*, 3–20. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

On the main subjects and results of research until the time of publication. The survey is focused on Waidan, but also concerns some aspects of Neidan.

## 1.2. *Neidan*

Neidan, or Internal Alchemy, is documented from the eighth century until the present day. Since its origins, it has been transmitted in a large number of lineages and branches, each of which—as shown by the studies cited in the present section and elsewhere in this bibliography—has had its own views and its own practices.

Huo 2015 is one of the clearest and most valuable overviews in Chinese. Hu and Lü 2004 is among several Chinese book-length studies on Taoism that provide relatively short descriptions of the main Neidan lineages. Also worthy of mention is Hao 1994, containing a survey of three different varieties—rather than “lineages” in the strict sense—of Neidan.

In works in Western languages, Neidan has often been called or regarded as a “physiological” technique, a definition definitely influenced by Needham 1983. Despite the valuable insights and suggestions found in this work, studies by Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars published in the last few decades have made it clear that Needham’s definition is reductive, and that Neidan is a much more complex phenomenon than his description might suggest.

The most reliable English-language survey of Neidan and its varieties is at present Yokote 2015. The overview in Pregadio and Skar 2000 is still useful, although the fast pace of Neidan studies, mainly owed to Chinese and Japanese scholars, would demand some portions to be emended. Robinet 1995 and Robinet 1997 present the views of a scholar who has given major contributions to the study of the foundations of Neidan and its relation to Taoism and other branches of Chinese thought and religion. Pregadio 2019 contains complete or partial translations of several important sources, with brief introductions on their place in the history of Neidan.

Hao Qin 郝勤. 1994. *Longhu dandao: Daojiao neidanshu* 龙虎丹道; 道教内丹术 (The alchemical way of the Dragon and the Tiger: Taoist Internal Alchemy). Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe.

Divided into three main parts concerned with different varieties of Neidan, traditionally known as Pure Cultivation (*qingxiu* 清修), or individual practices; Conjoined Cultivation (*shuangxiu* 雙修), involving sexual conjunction; and Nüdan 女丹, or Internal Alchemy for women. (On Nüdan see also below, sec. 9.4: *Neidan Practices*.)

Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛 and Lü Xichen 吕锡琛. 2004. *Daoxue tonglun: Daojia, Daojiao, Dandao* 道学通论：道家、道教、丹道 (A general introduction to Taoism: Thought, Religion, and Alchemy). Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxuan chubanshe

Part 5 (pp. 505–620) of this book contains chapters on about ten of the main lineages of Neidan and the respective doctrines and practices.

Huo Kegong 霍克功. 2015. *Daojiao neidanxue* 道教内丹学 (Taoist Internal Alchemy). Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe.

Despite the author's clear predilection for the system expounded by Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520–1606), this is one of the best overviews of Neidan in Chinese, clearly arranged and well documented by a large number of quotations from primary sources.

Needham, Joseph. 1983. *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. 5: *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, part V: *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Physiological Alchemy*. With the collaboration of Lu Gwei-Djen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Includes sub-section (j) “The Outer and the Inner Macrobiogens; the Elixir and the Enchymoma” of section 33, “Alchemy and Chemistry,” containing a survey of the history and the practices of Neidan. Several parts of this book should be consulted with caution and with comparison to other studies (especially Chinese and Japanese) on the same subjects.

Pregadio, Fabrizio. 2019. *Taoist Internal Alchemy: An Anthology of Neidan Texts*. Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press.

Complete or selected translations of sixteen Neidan works, representative of its main lineages and branches, with introductions and notes.

Pregadio, Fabrizio, and Lowell Skar. 2000. “Inner Alchemy.” In Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook*, 464–97. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

A useful but, in some portions, outdated overview of the history, literature, doctrines, and practices of Neidan.

Robinet, Isabelle. 1995. *Introduction à l'alchimie intérieure taoïste: De l'unité et de la multiplicité*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.

Actually not a general overview, but a collection of essays on several important aspects of Neidan written by one of the main Taoist scholars. Contains an annotated French translation of one of the

main Neidan classics, the *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Awakening to Reality; see below, sec. 6.4: *The Southern Lineage*).

Robinet, Isabelle. 1997. *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

The chapter entitled “Under the Song and the Yuan: Interior Alchemy” (pp. 212–56) is concerned with some of the main Neidan lineages and authors.

Yokote Yutaka [横手裕]. 2015. “Daoist Internal Alchemy.” Translated by Fabrizio Pregadio. In John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone, eds., *Modern Chinese Religion*, part 1: *Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan*, 2:1055–1110. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

By far the best and most up-to-date overview in a Western language of the history and main doctrines of different Neidan lineages.

## 2. REFERENCE WORKS

There is no true general reference work on Chinese alchemy, but several publications provide orientation to Waidan and Neidan literature. The main repository of Chinese alchemical texts is the *Daozang* 道藏, or Taoist Canon, the largest collection of Taoist works. Close to one fifth of its approximately 1,500 texts are related to the Waidan and Neidan traditions that developed until the mid-fifteenth century, when the collection was compiled and printed. The most useful reference works on the *Daozang* include Boltz 1987, Schipper and Verellen 2004, and Ren and Zhong 2005.

Virtually all extant Waidan sources are found in the *Daozang*, although other works—especially the *bencao* 本草, or pharmacopoeias—provide important source materials; see Ho Peng Yoke, *Explorations in Daoism*, cited below in the note to Ho 1979. The dating of the texts, most of which are anonymous and do not bear indications of provenance, has been one of the main obstacles in the historical study of Waidan. Important indications on this subject are found in Chen 1983 and Ho 1979, but much work remains to be done in order to reconstruct the development of this branch of Chinese alchemy.

Neidan sources, instead, are found both within and outside the *Daozang*. Several later works are included in the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏

## Works Cited

*Note:* Works only cited in the appendix “Taoist Alchemy: An Annotated Bibliography” are not duplicated here.

### *Sources*

Works cited from the *Daozang* 道藏 (Taoist Canon) are identified by the abbreviation DZ and the number they are assigned in Schipper and Verellen, eds., *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).

*Baopu zi* 抱朴子. See *Baopu zi neipian* 抱朴子內篇.

*Baopu zi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 [Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature]. Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343). Ed. Wang Ming 王明, *Baopu zi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋 [Annotated critical edition of the *Baopu zi neipian*] (second revised edition, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985).

*Baopu zi shenxian jinzhuo jing* 抱朴子神仙金鈞經 [Book of the Golden Liquid of the Divine Immortals, by the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature]. Contains Han to Six Dynasties materials. DZ 917.

*Bawei zhaolong miaojing* 八威召龍妙經 [Book of the Eight Awesome Powers for Summoning the Dragon Kings]. Fifth century. DZ 361.

*Cantong qi* 參同契 [Seal of the Unity of the Three]. Prob. sixth century. Text in Fabrizio Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi, the Source of the Taoist Way of the Golden Elixir* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011).

*Cantong qi wu xianglei biyao* 參同契五相類祕要 [Secret Essentials of the Five Categories According to the *Cantong qi*]. Prob. eighth century, with a commentary by Lu Tianji 盧天驥 written between 1111 and 1117. DZ 905.

*Cantong zhizhi* 參同直指 [Straightforward Pointers on the *Cantong qi*]. Liu Yiming 劉一明, 1799. In *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種

- [Twelve Books on the Dao], Huguo an 護國庵 ed., 1819. Repr. in *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書, vol. 8 (Chengdu: Ba-Shu shushe, 1992).
- Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun* 重陽立教十五論 [Fifteen Essays by Wang Chongyang to Establish the Teaching]. By or attributed to Wang Zhe 王嘉 (1113–70). DZ 1233.
- Chongyang quanzhen ji* 重陽全真集 [Complete Reality: An Anthology by Wang Chongyang]. By or attributed to Wang Zhe 王嘉 (1113–70). DZ 1153.
- Chunyang Lü zhenren yaoshi zhi* 純陽呂真人藥石製 [The Preparation of Medicinal Stones, by the Realized Man Lü of the Pure Yang]. Late fourteenth or the early fifteenth century (?). DZ 903.
- Dadan zhizhi* 大丹直指 [Straightforward Pointers on the Great Elixir]. Attr. Qiu Chuji 丘處機 (1148–1227). DZ 244.
- Dadong lian zhenbao jing jiuhuan jindan miaojue* 大洞鍊真寶經九還金丹妙訣 [Wondrous Instructions on the Golden Elixir of the Nine Reversions, Supplementary to the *Book of the Great Cavern on Refining the True Treasure*]. Chen Shaowei 陳少衛 (early eight century). DZ 891.
- Dadong lian zhenbao jing xiufu lingsha miaojue* 大洞鍊真寶經修伏靈砂妙訣 [Wondrous Instructions on Fixing Cinnabar, Supplementary to the *Book of the Great Cavern on Refining the True Treasure*]. Chen Shaowei 陳少衛 (early eighth century). DZ 890.
- Dadong zhenjing* 大洞真經 [True Book of the Great Cavern]. Complete title: *Shangqing dadong zhenjing* 上清大洞真經 [Highest Clarity True Book of the Great Cavern]. Fourth century. DZ 6.
- Danfang aolun* 丹房奧論 [A Profound Treatise on the Chamber of the Elixirs]. Early eleventh century. DZ 920.
- Danfang jianyuan* 丹方鑑源 [Mirror-Origin of the Alchemical Methods]. Dugu Tao 獨孤滔 (mid-tenth century). DZ 925.
- Danfang xuzhi* 丹房須知 [Essential Knowledge for the Chamber of the Elixirs]. Wu Wu 吳悞, 1163. DZ 900.
- Danlun juezhi xinjian* 丹論訣旨心鑑 [Insights on the Purport of the Alchemical Treatises]. Zhang Xuande 張玄德, ca. 900. DZ 935.
- Danyang zhenren yulu* 丹陽真人語錄 [Recorded Sayings of the Realized Man Ma Danyang]. Ma Yu 馬鈺 (1123–84). DZ 1057.
- Daode jing* 道德經 [Book of the Way and Its Virtue]. Fourth century BCE (?). *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 ed.

- Daode zhenjing guangsheng yi* 道德真經廣聖義 [Extended Interpretation of the Emperor's Exegesis of the *True Book of the Way and Its Virtue*]. Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933). DZ 725.
- Daode zhenjing jiyi* 道德真經集義 [Collected Explanations of the *True Book of the Way and Its Virtue*]. Cheng Taizhi 程泰之 (1123–95). DZ 723.
- Daojiao yishu* 道教義樞 [Pivot of Meaning of the Taoist Teaching]. Meng Anpai 孟安排 (fl. 699). DZ 1129.
- Daozang quejing mulu* 道藏闕經目錄 [Catalogue of Books Missing from the Taoist Canon]. 1445. DZ 1430.
- Dijun jiuzhen zhongjing* 帝君九真中經 [Central Book of the Nine Realized Ones of the Imperial Lord]. Complete title: *Shangqing Taishang Dijun jiuzhen zhongjing* 上清太上帝君九真中經 [Central Book of the Nine Realized Ones of the Most High Imperial Lord of Highest Clarity]. Fourth century, with later additions. DZ 1376.
- Dingguan jingzhu* 定觀經注 [Commentary to the Book on Concentration and Contemplation]. Early eighth century. DZ 400.
- Guanzi* 管子 [Master Guan]. Prob. fifth to first centuries BCE. *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 ed.
- Hongqian ru heiqian jue* 紅鉛入黑鉛訣 [Instructions for Compounding Red Lead and Black Lead]. Tang or Song dynasty. DZ 941.
- Huainan zi* 淮南子 [The Master of Huainan]. Ca. 139 BCE. *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 ed.
- Huandan fuming pian* 還丹復命篇 [Returning to One's Destiny through the Reverted Elixir]. Xue Daoguang 薛道光 (1078?–1191). DZ 1088.
- Huandan zhouhou jue* 還丹肘後訣 [Practical Instructions on the Reverted Elixir]. Tang dynasty. DZ 915.
- Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue* 黃帝九鼎神丹經訣 [Instructions on the Book of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor]. Second half of the seventh century. DZ 885.
- Huangdi neijing lingshu* 黃帝內經靈樞 [Inner Book of the Yellow Emperor: The Numinous Pivot]. Origin. ca. second century CE. *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 ed.
- Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 [Inner Book of the Yellow Emperor: Basic Questions]. Origin. ca. second century CE. *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 ed.
- Huangting jing* 黃庭經 [Book of the Yellow Court]. “Outer” (“Wai” 外) version, ca. third century; “Inner” (“Nei” 內) version, later fourth century. In *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 [Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds; DZ 1032], j. 11–12.

- Jindan da chengji* 金丹大成集 [A Great Anthology on the Golden Elixir]. Xiao Tingzhi 蕭廷芝 (fl. 1260–64). In *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 [Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality; DZ 263], j. 9–13.
- Jindan dayao* 金丹大要 [Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir]. Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290–ca. 1368). DZ 1067.
- Jindan sibai zi* 金丹四百字 [Four Hundred Words on the Golden Elixir]. Attr. to Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (ca. 987–1082). DZ 1081.
- Jindan wenda* 金丹問答 [Questions and Answers on the Golden Elixir]. Ca. 1260. In *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 [Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality; DZ 263], j. 10.
- Jinshi bu wujiu shu jue* 金石簿五九數訣 [Instructions on an Inventory of Forty-Five Metals and Minerals]. Tang dynasty (after 686). DZ 907.
- Jiuzhuan liuzhu shenxian jiudan jing* 九轉流珠神仙九丹經 [Book of the Liquid Pearl in Nine Cycles and of the Nine Elixirs of the Divine Immortals]. Early Tang or earlier. DZ 952.
- Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注 [Xiang'er Commentary to the *Laozi*]. Prob. second century CE. Ed. Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaozheng* 老子想爾注校證 [Annotated critical edition of the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*] (Hong Kong: Tong Nam, 1956).
- Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 [Central Book of Laozi]. Origin. early third century. In *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 [Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds; DZ 1032], j. 18–19.
- Liezi* 列子 [Master Lie]. Origin. ca. fourth century BCE, received text ca. fourth century CE. *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 ed.
- Lingbao bifa* 靈寶畢法 [Complete Methods of the Numinous Treasure]. Tenth century (?). (1) DZ 1191. (2) In *Lüzu quanshu* 呂祖全書, 33-juan edition. Repr. in *Zhonghua xu daoang* 中華續道藏, vol. 19 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1999).
- Lingbao wufu xu* 靈寶五符序 [Prolegomena to the Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure]. Fourth or early fifth century. DZ 388.
- Mengzi* 孟子 [Master Meng]. Fourth century BCE. Text in *Mengzi zhuzi suoyin* 孟子逐字索引 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1995).
- Miedu wulian shengshi miaojing* 滅度五鍊生尸妙經 [Wondrous Book on Salvation through Extinction and the Fivefold Refinement of the Corpse]. Fifth or sixth century. DZ 369.
- Nian'er shi zhaji* 廿二史劄記 [Notes on the Twenty-two Dynastic Histories]. Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814), 1799. Shijie shuju ed. (Taipei, 1983).

- Nihonkoku genzaisho mokuroku* 日本國見在書目錄 [Catalogue of (Chinese) Texts Extant in Japan]. Fujiwara no Sukeyo 藤原佐世 (?-898), ca. 891. *Zoku gunsho ruijū* 統群書類從 ed.
- Qianhong jiageng zhibao jicheng* 鉛汞甲庚至寶集成 [A Complete Antology on the Ultimate Treasure Made of True Lead and True Mercury]. Contains texts of different dates (Tang to Song). DZ 919.
- Ruyao jing zhujie* 入藥鏡注解 [Commentary to the *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine*]. Text attr. Cui Xifan 崔希範 (ca. 880–940); comm. by Wang Jie 王玠 (Wang Daoyuan 王道淵, ?-ca. 1380). DZ 135.
- Sanshiliu shuifa* 三十六水法 [Methods of the Thirty-six Aqueous Solutions]. Six Dynasties, possibly containing Han materials. DZ 930.
- Santian yisui* 三天易髓 [The Mutable Marrow of the Three Heavens]. Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1306). DZ 250.
- Shangqing jiudan shanghua taijing zhongji jing* 上清九丹上化胎精中記經 [Highest Clarity Book of the Central Record of the Higher Transformation of the Nine Elixirs into the Essence of the Embryo]. Origin. late fourth century. DZ 1382.
- Shangqing lingbao dafa* 上清靈寶大法 [Great Rites of the Highest Clarity and the Numinous Treasure]. Mid-thirteenth century. DZ 1221.
- Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Historian]. Sima Qian 司馬遷, ca 90 BCE. Zhonghua shuju ed. (Beijing, 1985).
- Shiyao eryl* 石藥爾雅 [Synonymic Dictionary of the Mineral Materia Medica]. Mei Biao 梅彪, 806. DZ 901.
- Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [Elucidations of the Signs and Explications of the Graphs]. 100 CE. Ed. Chen Changzhi 陳昌治, 1873. Repr. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963.
- Taiji zhenren jiuzhuan huandan jing yaojue* 太極真人九轉還丹經要訣 [Essential Instructions on the Book of the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles, by the Realized Man of the Supreme Ultimate]. Fourth century. DZ 889.
- Taiping jing* 太平經 [Book of Great Peace]. Original portions second century CE. Ed. Wang Ming 王明, *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平經合校 [Critical edition of the *Taiping jing*]. Second revised edition. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960.
- Taiping danjing yaojue* 太清丹經要訣 [Essential Instructions from the Books of the Elixirs of Great Clarity]. Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (fl. 673, traditional dates 581–682). In *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 [Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds; DZ 1032], j. 71.

- Taiqing jing tianshi koujue* 太清經天師口訣 [Oral Instructions of the Celestial Master on the Book of Great Clarity]. Mid-seventh century or earlier. DZ 883.
- Taiqing jinye shendan jing* 太清金液神丹經 [Book of the Divine Elixir of the Golden Liquor of Great Clarity]. Contains Han to Six Dynasties materials. DZ 882.
- Taiqing shibi ji* 太清石壁記 [Records from the Stone Wall of Great Clarity]. Edited in 758 or 759 based on an earlier version. DZ 881.
- Taishang Laojun neiguan jing* 太上老君內觀經 [Book of Inner Contemplation by the Most High Lord Lao]. Prob. early seventh century. DZ 641.
- Taiwei lingshu ziwen langgan huadan shenzhen shangjing* 太微靈書紫文琅玕華丹神真上經 [Supreme, Divine and Veritable Book on the Elixir Flower of Langgan, from the Numinous Writ in Purple Characters of the Heaven of Great Tenuity]. Fourth century. DZ 255.
- Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* 太一金華宗旨 [Ancestral Teachings on the Golden Flower of Great Unity]. Late seventeenth century. (1) *Daozang xubian* 道藏續編 ed. (2) Ed. Zhan Ranhui 湛然慧, in *Changsheng shu Xuming fang hekan* 長生術續命方合刊 (Beijing, 1921).
- Tongxuan bishu* 通玄祕術 [Secret Arts for Penetrating the Mystery]. Late ninth century, based of an earlier version. DZ 942.
- Tongyou jue* 通幽訣 [Instructions for Comprehending the Obscure]. Prob. by Chen Shao 陳邵 (Tang dynasty). DZ 913.
- Wei Boyang qifan dansha jue* 魏伯陽七返丹砂訣 [Wei Boyang's Instructions on the Elixir Obtained in Seven Cycles]. Before 806; commentary written before the mid-twelfth century. DZ 888.
- Wushang biyao* 無上祕要 [The Supreme Secret Essentials]. Ca. 580. DZ 1138.
- Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 [Awakening to Reality]. Zhang Boduan 張伯端, ca. 1075. Ed. Wang Mu 王沐, *Wuzhen pian qianjie* 『悟真篇』淺解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990).
- Wuzhen zhizhi* 悟真直指 [Straightforward Pointers on the Awakening to Reality]. Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821). In *Jingyin Daoshu shi'er zhong* 精印道書十二種 [Reprint of Twelve Books on the Dao], Jiangdong shuju, 1913.
- Xiangyan poyi* 象言破疑 [Removing Doubts on Symbolic Language]. Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821). In *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種 [Twelve Books on the Dao], Huguo an 護國庵 ed., 1819. Repr. in *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書, vol. 8 (Chengdu: Ba-Shu shushe, 1992).

GOLDEN ELIXIR PRESS

*From the Catalogue*

*The Taoist Tradition: An Introduction to Teachings, Schools, and Practices*, by Fabrizio Pregadio

A concise yet comprehensive introduction to Taoist thought and religion, exploring Laozi, Zhuangzi, views of the cosmos and the human being, meditation, ritual, and External and Internal Alchemy.

*Taoist Internal Alchemy: An Anthology of Neidan Texts*, by Fabrizio Pregadio

This anthology presents complete or partial translations of sixteen important works belonging to the Taoist tradition of Neidan, or Internal Alchemy. The selections are representative of the main Neidan lineages and branches.

*Foundations of Internal Alchemy: The Taoist Practice of Neidan*, by Wang Mu

A clear description of the practice of Internal Alchemy, based on the system of the *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality) with about two hundred quotations from original Taoist texts.

*The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi, the Source of the Taoist Way of the Golden Elixir*, by Fabrizio Pregadio

Under an allusive poetical language teeming with images and symbols, the *Cantong qi* sets forth the teaching that gave origin to Internal Alchemy.

*Cultivating the Tao: Taoism and Internal Alchemy*, by Liu Yiming (1734–1821)

Written by one of the greatest masters of this tradition, *Cultivating the Tao* offers a comprehensive overview of the main principles of Internal Alchemy in 26 short chapters.

*Awakening to Reality: The “Regulated Verses” of the Wuzhen pian, a Taoist Classic of Internal Alchemy*, by Zhang Boduan (987?–1082)

The *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality) is one of best-known Taoist alchemical texts. Written in the 11th century, it describes in a poetical form the main facets of Internal Alchemy.