

SAMPLE

FABRIZIO PREGADIO

Essays
on
Taoism
and
Taoist
Alchemy

Volume 2

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ESSAYS ON TAOISM
AND TAOIST ALCHEMY

VOLUME 2

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Fabrizio Pregadio

Essays on Taoism
and Taoist Alchemy

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Preface

The second volume of my collected essays contains seven studies on Taoism and Taoist alchemy. Here again, the essays are substantially reproduced in their original form, except for the study on the *Book of Changes* and Neidan which was previously unpublished. As I did with the first volume, I have corrected a few errors, made bibliographic references uniform, eliminated a few duplications, and added cross-references between the different essays.

Fabrizio Pregadio
Spring 2026

Laozi and Internal Alchemy

Originally published with the same title in Iwo Amelung and Joachim Kurtz, eds., *Reading the Signs: Philology, History, Prognostication. Festschrift for Michael Lackner*, 271–301 (München: Iudicium, 2018).

Taoist Internal Alchemy, or Neidan 內丹, offers a large number of examples concerning the relation between a doctrinal authority and a later tradition that traces its origins to it. In this context, “authority” refers to one or more sources—textual, human, or divine, but usually represented by texts—that set forth foundational teachings. Later traditions use different sets of textual and non-textual devices, including spurious scriptural attributions and non-historical lines of transmission, in order to show that they derive from that source and therefore provide access to it. A tradition needs not only to state the relation to its source, but also to formulate and remind it repeatedly.

As a tradition that is by its nature syncretic, different aspects of Neidan can be traced back to multiple doctrinal authorities, including some pertaining to Buddhism, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism. As a Taoist tradition, however, the main authorities in the eyes of its masters and practitioners are undoubtedly Laozi and his *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue). Neidan is seen by its adepts as a science that applies the doctrines summarized in the *Daode jing* to the microcosmic domain. This essay provides examples of different ways used in Neidan works in order to show that their teachings and practices have the *Daode jing* as their direct or ultimate source. These include the creation of the image of Laozi as an alchemist, as the originator (or a component) of Neidan lineages, and as the author of Neidan texts; the creation of commentaries to the *Daode jing* by authors of Neidan works; and the acknowledged, or unacknowledged but evident, references to the *Daode jing* in Neidan scriptures and texts. In all these cases, the aim is the same: to establish and exhibit the

bond between an integral exposition of the doctrine—which Taoists find in the *Daode jing*—and the principles and practices of Neidan.

Each subject touched upon in this essay would deserve more thorough study. Here I attempt to provide a general overview. Despite its many limits, I am pleased to dedicate this essay to Michael Lackner, as a small token of gratitude for the support he has offered to my work throughout many years.

LAOZI, THE ALCHEMIST

Including Laozi in the history or the “pre-history” of Neidan required fashioning a new persona, parallel to his identity as the author of the *Daode jing*. In this way, Laozi could be presented as the originator of Neidan and be involved in the transmission of its doctrines. Within this context, Laozi was also ascribed with the authorship of a few Neidan works.

Laozi as an Alchemist

The earliest alchemical persona of Laozi was created by Taoist hagiographers, but it was related to Waidan 外丹 (External Alchemy).¹ In their works, the alchemist Laozi has two different identities: he is either a student of the arts of the Elixir or their master. In the first case, Laozi’s teacher is his mother, usually known as the Primordial Lady (Yuanjun 元君), who instructs him on alchemy and several other subjects. Her role as a mentor is also mentioned in a few Waidan sources, but hagiographers develop and expand it.² Through his

¹ On Laozi’s Taoist hagiographies see Kohn, *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth*, 7–36.

² See especially *Laozi shiliüe* (A Short History of Laozi; DZ 773), 2.19a–22b, and *Hunyuan shengji* (Annals of the Saint of the Inchoate Origin; DZ 770), 2.41b–44b. See also the biography of the Primordial Lady in *Yongcheng jixian lu* (Records of the Immortals Gathered in the Walled City; DZ 783), 1.7a–8a; trans. Kohn, “The Mother of the Tao,” 99–100. On the Primordial Lady and Waidan see Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China*, 40–41 and 114. It should not be forgotten that, according to Taoist doctrine, Laozi’s mother was generated by Laozi himself in his divine or pre-cosmic aspect, so that he could descend to earth

mother's teachings, Laozi becomes a master of Waidan. During his meeting with Yin Xi 尹喜 (the Guardian of the Pass), Laozi transmits to him not only the *Daode jing*, but also alchemical scriptures and instructions, including the *Jiudan jing* 九丹經 (Book of the Nine Elixirs) and other works of the early Taiqing 太清 (Great Clarity) corpus. He then recites verses on the alchemical practice. One of them is a "Song" ("Ge" 歌) in three-character lines, to which I will return later in this essay.³

Neidan inherits both of these images. Like Huangdi 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor, did before him, Laozi practiced alchemy, and this granted him his status. Among those who hold this view is the southern Quanzhen 全真 master, Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290-ca. 1368), who writes: "The Way of the Golden Elixir was cultivated by the Yellow Emperor, and he ascended to Heaven; it was cultivated by Laozi, and he became the patriarch of the Way."⁴ Laozi's teacher in Neidan is once again his mother. When Chen Zhixu states, "The Supreme Primordial Lady told Laozi: 'The accomplishment of long life depends on the Elixir, and the achievement of the Elixir depends on spirit,'" he is reporting word for word a passage found in the chronicles of Laozi.⁵ The hagiographic nature of these and similar passages is plain, but the intention of their authors is the opposite compared to the hagiographers: instead of enhancing Laozi's persona with the attribution of alchemical knowledge, they emphasize that Neidan derives from the *Daode jing*. For example, the teachings that Laozi received from the Primordial Lady are an occasion for Chen Zhixu to underline a point that goes beyond hagiography:

無上元君謂老子曰：神丹入口，壽無窮矣。老子修之，是大道祖。後言金丹之道為黃老術，不知聖人所傳乃金丹至道，脩仙作佛之大事，非術也，是道也。

and transmit his *Daode jing*.

³ *Taishang Hunyuan zhenlu* (True Records of the Most High of the Inchoate Origin; DZ 954), 7a-9a; *Laozi shilüe*, 3.14b-17b; *Hunyuan shengji*, 3.10b-13a. On the transmission of Waidan from Laozi to Yin Xi see Baldrian-Hussein, "Inner Alchemy: Notes on the Origin and Use of the Term Neidan," 172-74.

⁴ *Jindan dayao* (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir; DZ 1067), 1.1a.

⁵ *Jindan dayao*, 3.1a and 13.16b. Compare *Laozi shilüe*, 2.9a; *Hunyuan shengji*, 2.41b.

The Supreme Primordial Lady told Laozi: “When you ingest the Elixir, your longevity will be limitless.” Laozi cultivated this and became the patriarch of the Great Way. Later, it has been said that the Way of the Golden Elixir is a technique of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. [Those who say this] do not know that the perfect Way of the Golden Elixir transmitted by the sages, the great undertaking for cultivating immortality and becoming a Buddha, is not a technique (*shu*), it is a Way (*dao*).⁶

According to Chen Zhixu, Neidan is in the first place a doctrine, and not simply a technique, because its roots are found in the *Daode jing*.

Laozi as the Originator of Neidan

The identity of Laozi as a Neidan master or disciple has therefore one purpose: to show that the *Daode jing* is the main source of Neidan. Chen Zhixu himself plainly says that “the Way of Laozi is nothing but the Way of the Golden Elixir” 老子之道，唯金丹之道。⁷ Other works contain analogous statements, including the following: “The five thousand words of *The Way and Its Virtue* that the Most High Laozi, August Emperor of the Mysterious Origin, transmitted to Yin Xi, the Guardian of the Pass, entirely contain the true and entire purport of the Reverted Elixir (*huandan* 還丹).”⁸ We also read that it was only due to the compassion of Laozi that “the Great Way of the Golden Elixir began to exist, through which he taught people the discourses on returning [to the Dao].”⁹

⁶ *Jindan dayao*, 14.7b. In another passage, Chen Zhixu states even more emphatically: “It has been said that the way of cultivation and refinement consists of the techniques of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. No more of this nonsense! This is the Great Way of the Golden Elixir, and it cannot be called a technique” (id., 3.4b).

⁷ *Jindan dayao*, 14.13a.

⁸ *Longhu huandan juesong* (Instructions and Songs of Praise on the Reverted Elixir of the Dragon and the Tiger; DZ 1082), 9b. Although this work is probably written in the perspective of Waidan, the views of its commentary (written by Gushen zi 谷神子, identity unknown), which contains the passage quoted above, correspond at least in part to those of Neidan.

⁹ *Jindan zhengzong* (The Correct Lineage of the Golden Elixir; DZ 1087), 2b.

In addition to these broad statements, others have a more precise import. Perhaps the main example is found in the preface to Zhang Boduan's 張伯端 (ca. 987–1082) *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Awakening to Reality), almost certainly spurious but authoritative because of its attribution. The origins of Neidan are credited to both Laozi and the Buddha (one of the additional doctrinal authorities of Neidan), but the discourse is not limited to issues of ascription:

老釋以性命學，開方便門，教人修種，以逃生死。釋氏以空寂為宗，若頓悟圓通，則直超彼岸。如有習漏未盡，則尚徇于有生。老氏以煉養為真，若得其要樞，則立躋聖位。如其未明本性，則猶滯于幻形。

Laozi and the Buddha used the learning of *xing* (inner nature) and *ming* (destiny, existence) to open the gates of expedient methods (*fangbian*), and taught people to cultivate the seed in order to escape [the cycles of] birth and death. For the Buddha, the source lies in emptiness and silence. If one suddenly awakens and attains complete understanding, one directly transcends to the other shore; but as long as habits and contaminations are not exhausted, one is submitted to rebirth. For Laozi, the truth lies in refining and nourishing oneself. If one obtains what is crucial and essential, one immediately rises to the rank of a saint; but as long as one's fundamental nature is not comprehended, one is tied to the illusory body.¹⁰

With his mention of *xing* 性 and *ming* 命, the author of the preface implicitly alludes to the “conjoined cultivation of Nature and Existence” (*xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修), one of the main principles of Neidan. In the conventional view, Buddhism and Taoism were deemed to give emphasis to *xing* and *ming*, respectively. The preface points out that although Buddhism can lead to the “sudden awakening” (*dunwu* 頓悟), those who cultivate *xing* should not disregard removing the “habits and contaminations” associated with *ming*. Analogously, Taoism may focus on “refining and nourishing” (*lianyang* 煉養) the bodily form, but unless one also attends to *xing*, one remains tied to the “illusory body.”¹¹

¹⁰ *Wuzhen pian*, preface, 1.

¹¹ Although the objections of Taoism and Buddhism to one another were to a large extent conventional, the two models of self-cultivation, respectively

Laozi in the Neidan Lines of Transmission

As the originator of Neidan, Laozi was also included within its lines of transmission. These lines, summarized in charts or described in essays, display an intentional disregard of history in the ordinary sense of the term, and only intend to trace the doctrinal origins of Neidan.¹²

One example is provided by Xiao Tingzhi 蕭廷芝 (fl. 1260–64), whose chart grafts the origins of Neidan onto the Taoist pantheon. The transmission begins with Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊 (Celestial Worthy of the Original Commencement) and the Three Clarities (Sanqing 三清).¹³ One of the latter, Daode Tianzun 道德天尊 (Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue), is Laozi in his divine aspect. It is him who passes on the teaching to several other deities and immortals, including his mother, until it reaches the “historical” Laozi. From him, through several intermediate steps, the transmission leads to Heshang gong 河上公 and then takes a series of unexpected turns: Heshang gong’s teachings are received by Wei Boyang 魏伯陽, the reputed author of the *Cantong qi* 參同契, or *Seal of the Unity of the Three*, and he in turn passes them on to none other than Zhang Daoling 張道陵.¹⁴ The transmission continues until it reaches the Realized Man Huayang (Huayang zhenren 華陽真人), i.e., Donghua dijun 東華帝君 (Imperial Lord of Eastern Florescence). From then onwards, it continues in more familiar ways, with the legendary and historical patriarchs of the

focused on *xing* or *ming*, played a major role in the history of Neidan, involving different views about which of them is the key for cultivating the other. See Robinet, *Introduction à l’alchimie intérieure taoïste*, 184–91, and the essay no. 4 in this volume, pp. 173–79 and *passim*. I will return to this subject below.

¹² Several lines of transmission in Neidan are discussed in Yokote, “Daoist Internal Alchemy.”

¹³ Here as elsewhere, Yuanshi Tianzun is both the highest deity and one of the Three Clarities immediately below him. In the present chart, his name in the first function is Fuli Yuanshi Tianzun 浮黎元始天尊.

¹⁴ In addition to involving the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi dao 天師道) in the transmission of Neidan, the mention of Zhang Daoling may have another reason, as he also was subjected to the creation of an alchemical persona during the Six Dynasties. See Pregadio, *Great Clarity*, 147–52.

The *Book of Changes* and Internal Alchemy

Previously unpublished. Some portions of this article draw from my earlier “Creation and Its Inversion: Cosmos, Human Being, and Elixir in the *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three),” 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).

INTRODUCTION

In different ways and to different extents, the Taoist alchemical traditions have used the Chinese cosmological system for two main purposes, complementary to one another: to explicate the relation among Dao, cosmos, and human being, and to frame doctrines and practices that intend to guide adepts to “return to the Dao” (*huandao* 還道, *fandao* 返道, and analogous terms). The language and imagery of cosmology were incorporated into the arts of the Elixir first within Waidan 外丹 (External Alchemy) from the end of the Six Dynasties (ca. sixth century CE) and later within Neidan 內丹 (Internal Alchemy), which as far as we know developed from around 700 CE.

The *Yijing* 易經, or *Book of Changes*, has played a fundamental role in this context. While alchemists have largely disregarded its primary function as a divination manual, they have used its emblems—lines, trigrams, and hexagrams—to illustrate features of the cosmos and stages of the alchemical process. Neglecting their meanings and roles in the context of the mantic arts, those emblems are employed by alchemists as pure “images” (*xiang* 象) that enable them to represent aspects of their doctrines and practices. This approach has an important consequence: as they are used in Neidan, the images of the *Changes* are in every respect equivalent to several other sets of

emblems that belong to the wider Chinese cosmological system, with the difference that lines, trigrams, and hexagrams also allow alchemists to display formless principles and inner processes in a visual, graphical way.

In addition, the *Changes* and its appendixes have provided the alchemical traditions with several “exemplary statements,” which authors of Neidan texts have read and interpreted in light of their views. Those statements have been associated with major subjects within Neidan, including its view of the human being and the arrangement of the stages of the practice. Authors of Neidan texts have used them with the evident intent of showing that Neidan is rooted in the same wisdom and learning that the legendary or reputed authors of the *Changes* digested into its different portions. In this case as well, the *Changes* has been seen as one of the main sources of Neidan, and Neidan in turn has been deemed not only to be consistent with the views of the cosmos and the human being reflected in the *Changes*, but also to offer a way—independent of the mantic arts—to integrate them into one’s own practice.

This essay provides an overview, supported by several examples but necessarily limited compared to the broad range and the vast amount of available materials, of these and some other uses of the text in Neidan. After a section concerned with the use of “symbolic language” in Neidan—important to appreciate the function of the images and emblems drawn from the *Changes*—we shall look at the work that, for the first time in the history of Chinese alchemy, included extensive portions based on the *Changes* and its cosmology. We shall then review a few “exemplary statements” drawn from the *Changes* and its appendixes, and finally examine some of the main uses of lines, trigrams, and hexagrams in Neidan.¹

¹ The bibliography of studies on the use of the *Yijing* in Neidan is remarkably wide. Among several works that would deserve mention see, in order of date of publication, Liu Guoliang, *Daojia yu Zhouyi*, 49–82; Zhan Shichuang, *Yixue yu Daojiao sixiang guanxi yanjiu*, 131–99; Zhang Weiwen, *Song Yuan Daojiao Yixue chutan*; some of the essays collected in Lai Xisan, *Dandao yu Yidao: Neidan de xingming xiulian yu xiantian xue*; and Duan Zhicheng, *Daojiao dandao Yixue yanjiu*. Moreover, the Neidan readings of the *Yijing* should be examined in light of its use in the broader context of Taoism, a subject I cannot approach in this essay. The main general Chinese

ALCHEMY AS SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

To begin our survey, it is useful to consider how the authors of some Neidan sources have understood and described the function of *Yijing* images and related emblems. In one of the large number of works ascribed to him, Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (one of the main figures in the history of Neidan, 1194–1229?) attributes these words to his master, Chen Nan 陳楠 (?–1213):

夫天仙之道，能變化飛升也，上士可以學之。... 此乃上品鍊丹之法。本無卦爻，亦無斤兩，其法簡易，故以心傳之，甚易成也。

In the Way of Celestial Immortality, one can undergo transmutation and ascend in flight [to Heaven]. Superior persons can study this Way. . . . This is the alchemical method of the higher degree. Fundamentally, there are no trigrams and no lines, no pounds and no ounces. Its method is simple; therefore it is transmitted through the mind and is extremely easy to achieve.²

Trigrams and lines, instead, are used in the middle and the lower degrees, which are transmitted in spoken and written forms, respectively, but—perhaps contrary to expectation—are said to be more difficult to accomplish.³ Aware of Bai Yuchan's words, his second-generation disciple, Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1306), writes in his "Essay on Trigrams and Hexagrams" ("Guaxiang lun" 卦象論):

studies on this subject include Liu Guoliang, *Daojia yu Zhouyi*, and Zhan Shichuang, *Yixue yu Daojiao sixiang guanxi yanjiu*. Summaries of the main points are found in Lu Guolong, "Daojiao Yixue lunlue," and Zhu Yueli, "Daojiao Yixue zongshu." In addition to several collections of descriptive notes on Taoist texts (in particular, Schipper and Verellen, *The Taoist Canon*; Ren Jiyu and Zhong Zhaopeng, *Daozang tiyao*; and Xiao Dengfu, *Zhengtong Daozang zongmu tiyao*), surveys of relevant primary sources are found in Zhang Weiwen, "Yixue lei Daojing shuolue"; Liu Shaojun, "Daozang, Xu Daozang, Zangwai daoshu zhong Yixue zhuzuo tiyao"; and Kalinowski, "La littérature divinatoire dans le Daozang," 86–89.

² *Xiuzhen shishu* (Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality; DZ 263), "Xiuxian bianhuo lun" 修仙辨惑論 (Essay on Resolving Doubts in the Cultivation of Immortality), 4.1b. A translation of this essay is found in Pregadio, *Taoist Internal Alchemy: An Anthology of Neidan Texts*, 110–17.

³ *Xiuzhen shishu*, 4.1b–2a.

諸丹書皆用卦爻者，何也？此聖人設教而顯道也。... 丹書用卦用爻者，蓋欲學者法象安爐，依爻進火，易為取則也。海瓊真人謂無卦爻者，警拔後人不可泥於爻象，即此用而離此用也。

Why do all books on the Elixir use trigrams, hexagrams, and lines (*guayao*)? The reason is that the sages establish teachings in order to manifest the Dao. . . . We may say that the books on the Elixir use trigrams, hexagrams, and lines because they want students to set up the furnace by modeling themselves on the images and to “advance the Fire” in accordance with the lines, easily gathering guidelines from them.⁴ When the realized man Haiqiong (*i.e.*, *Bai Yuchan*) said that “there are no trigrams and no lines,” he intended to warn the people of later times against getting mired in the lines and the images. This means that they should use them but then move away from their use.⁵

Li Daochun concludes:

雖然丹道用卦，火候用爻，皆是譬喻，卻不可執在卦爻上。

Although the Way of the Elixir uses trigrams and hexagrams, and the Fire phases (*huohou*) use their lines, these are all metaphors: one should not stick to trigrams, hexagrams, and lines.⁶

The metaphoric or symbolic language alluded to by Li Daochun is also the subject of an elaborate explanation given by his contemporary, Mu Changzhao 牧常晁 (thirteenth century):

聖人以象數論金丹者，出乎不得已也。聖人必超出於象物之表，氣數之外，豈區區模範於象數之內哉。或曰：金丹之道必以數言，何也？答云：在太極之先者，不論以數。在太極之下者，必以數言之。上士則忘象數得其一，中士必因象數守其一，下士必學象數求其一。苟不以數，無以開後學之來，所以立象為權教也。

⁴ “Advancing the Fire” (*jinhuo* 進火) is the first of the two main stages of the Fire phases (*huohou* 火候), followed by the stage called “withdrawing the tally” (*tuihu* 退符). As we shall see, the two stages are represented by a series of twelve hexagrams.

⁵ *Zhonghe ji* (Centrality and Harmony: An Anthology; DZ 249), “Guaxiang lun,” 4.2a-4a.

⁶ *Zhonghe ji*, “Guaxiang lun,” 4a.

If the sages have discussed the Golden Elixir by means of images and numbers (*xiangshu*), this is because they had no other choice. The sages surely rise beyond objects used as images (*xiangwu*) and outside numbers that set forth destiny (*qishu*). How could they be constrained and moulded by images and numbers? Someone asks: Why must the Way of the Golden Elixir be spoken about by means of numbers? I answer: What is prior to the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) is not discussed by means of numbers; what is below the Great Ultimate is necessarily discussed by means of numbers. Superior persons forget images and numbers and attain it; average persons must use images and numbers in order to guard it; inferior persons must study images and numbers in order to seek it. Without using numbers, there would be no way to give transmission to posterity; therefore establishing images is an expedient teaching.⁷

“Expedient teaching” (*quanjiao* 權教) refers in Buddhism to the preliminary or provisional teachings given by the Buddha before he delivered his “true” or “substantial teaching” (*shijiao* 實教) in the final years of his life. The corresponding “true teaching” of Neidan is, according to Mu Changzhao, the one in which all words and emblems are forgotten.

With their statements, Mu Changzhao and his predecessors touch on a major issue in Neidan, namely the function of the countless “images” (*xiang*) found in works belonging to this tradition. As Mu shows, those images consist of words and numbers (or “ciphers,” *shu* 數). In addition, they comprise many of the emblems used in Chinese cosmology, beginning with those drawn from the *Yijing*; and they also include alchemical terms proper—“lead” and “mercury,” “tripod” and “furnace” to mention a few examples. Like those quoted above, several other authors of Neidan works are aware of the nature and the role played by those images, and often refer to them as “metaphors” (*piyu* 譬喻), “exemplary images” (*faxiang* 法象), or even “empty names” (*xuming* 虛名) and “empty similitudes” (*xubi* 虛比). The latter term is found in a renowned poem of the Song-dynasty *Jindan sibaizi* 金丹四百字 (Four Hundred Words on the Golden Elixir):

⁷ *Xuanzong zhizhi wanfa tonggui* (Straightforward Pointers on the School of Mystery: Reintegrating the Ten Thousand Dharmas; DZ 1066), 3.19a.

火候不用時，冬至不在子。及其沐浴法，卯酉時虛比。

The Fire phases do not depend on the hours,
and the winter solstice is not at *zi*.
As for the method of bathing,
the times of *mao* and *you* are empty similitudes.⁸

Ma Ziran 馬自然, who lived in the eleventh century, is ascribed with the following lines, which contain the remarkable expressions “time without divisions” (*buze shi* 不擇時) and “trigrams without lines” (*wuyao gua* 無爻卦):

不擇時中分子午，無爻卦內別乾坤。

Distinguish *zi* and *wu* within the time without divisions,
determine Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ within the trigrams without
lines.⁹

The authors’ mistrust in the very words and images that they repeatedly use conflicts with two essential features and functions of the alchemical language. First, a large number of them refer to sets of cosmological emblems that perform an essential role in explaining how the cosmic domain and the human being are related to the Dao. Second, another substantial portion of those words and images concern loci, features, and functions of the human body and the human mind, and serve not only to frame, but especially to give meaning to the practice. Neidan terms, therefore, may be merely “metaphoric” or even “empty,” but as remarked by another major author, Wu Shouyang 伍守陽 (1574–1644), “whenever there is an empty name there must be an actual meaning” (*fan you yi xuming*

⁸ *Jindan sibai zi*, poem 13, in *Jindan sibai zi zhushi* (Commentary to the Four Hundred Words on the Golden Elixir), 4a. A translation of this work is found in Pregadio, *Taoist Internal Alchemy: An Anthology of Neidan Texts*, 87–108. “Bathing” (*muyu* 沐浴) defines two moments of pause in the cycle of the Fire phases, formally corresponding to the earthly branches *mao* 卯 and *you* 酉, which in Neidan are seen as the symbolic places and times where Yang generates True Yin and Yin generates True Yang, respectively.

⁹ These verses are quoted (sometimes in slightly variant forms) in several works, including Li Daochun’s *Zhonghe ji*, 4.4b.

The Authorship, Date, and Composition of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*

This three-part essay was originally published in Chinese as “*Zhouyi cantong qi zhi zuozhe ji chengshu niandai kao*” 《周易參同契》之作者及成書年代考 [The authorship and date of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*], *Dandao yanjiu* 丹道研究 4 (2026): 13–83.

Introduction

Premodern sources and contemporary studies are virtually unanimous in regarding the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (The Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the *Book of Changes*; hereafter *Cantong qi*) as the foremost Chinese alchemical text. It is equally well known that this work, almost entirely written in poetry, has given rise to a variety of readings. The wide range of interpretations offered in commentaries and other works, which often diverge not only on its nature but also on its authorship and history, are caused in part by its obscure language, where almost every word is at the same time a poetical term and a technical term, and by the multiple possible meanings of several verses. These challenges are amplified—and to some extent, inevitably caused—by the primary lens through which the *Cantong qi* has been read and interpreted, namely Taoist alchemy in both of its branches: Waidan 外丹 (External Alchemy) and Neidan 內丹 (Internal Alchemy).

Neidan, in particular, has shaped the dominant understanding of the *Cantong qi* by positioning this work as the origin and foundation of its teachings and practices. This view firmly establishes the *Cantong qi* not only as an alchemical text, but as the first Neidan text. In

addition to this, a less prevalent tradition has existed within Taoism for interpreting the text. This approach draws attention to a point reflected not only in the very title of the *Cantong qi* but also explicitly stated within its verses and frequently discussed by commentators, including some Neidan adherents: the *Cantong qi* is not limited to a single subject but integrates three major themes into a unified doctrine, with alchemy representing just one facet.

The best way to begin discussing this point is by looking at one of the most prominent, but also most complex, aspects of the *Cantong qi*, namely its title. The words *cantong* 參同 have given rise to two main interpretations among commentators.¹ The first is based on the meaning of *can* 參 as “merging” or “being one,” and *tong* 同 as “unity.” Since *qi* 契 also suggests the concept of “joining into one” or “as one,” all three words in the title, according to this view, point towards ideas of union and oneness. This perspective would allow for such translations as *Joining as One with Unity*. This interpretation first appeared in the anonymous Waidan commentary (ca. 700 CE) and was later echoed in the commentaries by Peng Xiao 彭曉 (947) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1197). The *Cantong qi* itself utilizes *can* in this sense within one of its verses (43:12).²

The second interpretation proposes a distinct meaning for *can* 參. Here, *can* means, or rather stands for, *san* 三, “three.” In this light, the title *Cantong qi* refers to as a *seal* signifying the *unification* of *three* components, allowing the reader to comprehend their inherent unity. This interpretation of *can* was first explicitly suggested by Yu Yan 俞琰 (1284) in his commentary and subsequently adopted by several other authors.

¹ See Meng Naichang and Meng Qingxuan, *Wangu danjing wang*, 410–14, which discusses ten different explanations, and Meng Naichang, *Zhouyi cantong qi kaobian*, 62–65. The analogy between the title of the *Cantong qi* and the titles of “weft” or “apocryphal” texts (*weishu* 緯書) is discussed in the second part of this essay.

² Citations of the *Cantong qi* in this form refer to the numbers of sections and lines in the text edited and translated in Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, vol. 1: *A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi*, based on the Jinling shufang 金陵書坊 edition of Chen Zhixu’s 陳致虛 *Zhouyi cantong qi zhujie* (Commentary to the *Cantong qi*). For correspondences to *zhang* 章 numbers in Chen Zhixu’s recension, see the “Finding List” at the end of this article.

Which of the two interpretations is correct is ultimately not a meaningful question, since whoever created the title *Cantong qi* was certainly aware of its dual meaning. It is, instead, noteworthy that proponents of the second interpretation often cite passages from the concluding portion of the text (sections 84 and 87) to support their view. These passages state that the *Cantong qi* concerns itself with “three ways” (*sandao* 三道) that originate from, and therefore lead to, the same source. The three ways are defined as the system of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), Taoism (Huang-Lao 黃老, named after the mythical Yellow Emperor and Laozi), and alchemy (“the work with the fire of the furnace”; 84:1–8).

When we consider the title *Cantong qi* as signifying “unity of the three,” several aspects of the text become clearer. First, it is possible to identify, within the seemingly perplexing but certainly intentional sequence of poems in the first two “books” (*pian* 篇), distinct sections dedicated to each of the three core subjects:

— *Book 1*: Cosmology (sections 1–17); Taoism (18–27); Alchemy (28–42)

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

As shown in last part of this article, Book 3 (containing sections 75–88) is comprised of later, miscellaneous materials. Second, recognizing the *Cantong qi*’s structure as reflecting a threefold unity sheds light on other issues, the most important of which concern the text’s authorship and date, the two main subjects, obviously related to one another, to which this essay is devoted.

For about a millennium, the *Cantong qi* has been attributed to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽, deemed to be a Han-dynasty alchemist native of the Shangyu 上虞 district of Kuaiji 會稽 (in present-day Zhejiang). As we shall see, his authorship is the subject of three main accounts. The first one depicts Wei Boyang as the sole author of the *Cantong qi*. The second one adds that he transmitted his work first to Xu Congshi 徐從事 and later to Chunyu Shutong 淳于叔通. In the third account, not only Wei Boyang, but also Xu Congshi and Chunyu Shutong are named as authors of the *Cantong qi*. In addition, other sources preserve traces of an earlier and less well-known narrative, which again exists in multiple versions. Here Wei Boyang performs a minor role, and the primary author of the text is Xu Congshi, with contributions from Chunyu Shutong.

The first part of this essay focuses on two of the legacies that lie in the background of the *Cantong qi* as we know it today, namely the cosmological and the alchemical traditions. The subject of authorship, however, is inextricably tied to other themes examined in the following two parts, including the date of the text, its threefold subdivision of subjects, and its arrangement into three “books.” Moreover, while the period of formation of the *Cantong qi* ends with the establishment of its “standard” version between ca. 400 and ca. 600 CE, the events traced in this essay only reached full achievement in the early sixteenth century with the creation of the version anachronistically entitled *Guwen cantong qi* 古文參同契 (Ancient Text of the *Cantong qi*). This version assigns a role in the creation of the *Cantong qi* not only to the two legacies represented by the masters mentioned above, but also the third tradition at the basis of the text, namely the Taoist tradition.

PART I

Who Wrote the *Cantong qi*?

In one of the last sections of his work, the author of the *Cantong qi* describes himself as a recluse living in a remote valley. At the beginning of the poem, he reveals his putative birthplace:

會稽鄙夫，幽谷朽生。挾懷朴素，不樂權榮。

A lowly man born in Kuaiji,
I rust my life away in an obscure valley.
I cherish plainness and simplicity,
and find no joy in power or fame. (86:1–4)

In the second century, when Wei Boyang supposedly wrote the *Cantong qi*, Kuaiji 會稽 was a large commandery (*jun* 郡) approximately corresponding to present-day eastern Zhejiang and northern Fujian. Its territory partially overlapped the region south of the lower Yangzi River known as Jiangnan 江南. As this region has hosted a variety of alchemical traditions throughout the history of China, belonging to both Waidan and Neidan, the verses quoted above might seem to provide a reliable testimony to the southern origins of the *Cantong qi* and of its author.

The evidence, however, is not as straightforward as it might appear. Instead of Kuaiji 會稽, one of the two earliest extant recensions of the *Cantong qi* mentions Luguo 魯國, the name of an ancient kingdom in present-day Shandong.¹ The issues related to this different reading are more significant than those normally raised by a textual variant. Where did the author of the *Cantong qi* come from? Was the *Cantong qi* written in Jiangnan or in Shandong? More important, was the text originally, or primarily, attached to traditions based in one of those regions? The last question is especially worthy of notice: while

¹ The “Luguo” reading is found in *Zhouyi cantong qi* (DZ 999), 2.9a, dating from ca. 700 and containing a commentary attributed to Yin Changsheng 陰長生. The other earliest recension of the *Cantong qi*, also dating from ca. 700 and containing an anonymous Waidan commentary, is the *Zhouyi cantong qi zhu* (Commentary to the *Cantong qi*; DZ 1004); it is extant only in part and does not contain the poem quoted above.

Wei Boyang was a southern alchemist, both Xu Congshi and Chunyu Shutong were representatives of the cosmological and mantic legacies of Han-dynasty northern China. This leads to a further question, raised by one of the accounts summarized above: Why should an alchemist transmit his work to two cosmologists? To answer these questions, we must look closer at the identities of the three masters involved in the traditional accounts of the creation and early transmission of the *Cantong qi*.

WEI BOYANG, THE MASTER OF ALCHEMY

The best-known account of Wei Boyang is found in the *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Biographies of the Divine Immortals), a work attributed to Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) but only extant in reconstructed versions that are much later than its supposed date. The earliest but fragmentary record is a short passage in the *Riyue xuanshu lun* 日月玄樞論 (Treatise on the Sun and the Moon, the Mysterious Pivot), written by Liu Zhigu 劉知古 in ca. 750 in order to promote the alchemical model of the *Cantong qi* and assert Wei Boyang's authorship.² The first complete record is found in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Xingguo Reign Period), dating from as late as 978. This version begins by saying that Wei Boyang, a native of Wu (approximately corresponding to present-day southern Jiangsu and Zhejiang) and the son of a high-ranking family, retired to a mountain with three disciples in order to compound an elixir. When they tested the elixir on a dog, the dog died. Wei Boyang and one of the disciples decided anyway to ingest the compound, but they also died. Having lost any hope of attaining immortality, the other two disciples left, only to regret after a short time:

二子去後，伯陽即起，將所服丹，內死弟子及白犬口中，皆起。弟子姓虞，遂皆仙去。道逢入山伐木人，乃作手書與鄉里人寄謝。二弟子乃始懊恨。

After the two disciples left, Boyang stood up. He took the elixir that they had ingested and poured some of it into the mouths of the dead disciple and the white dog. Both of them stood up.

² *Riyue xuanshu lun*, in *Quan Tangwen* (Complete Prose of the Tang Dynasty), 334.13b, and in *Daoshu* (Pivot of the Dao; DZ 1017), 26.1a.

Destiny, Vital Force, or Existence?

On the Meanings of *Ming* 命 in Taoist Internal Alchemy and its Relation to *Xing* 性 or Human Nature

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金丹者，性命之別名
Golden Elixir is another name for Xing and Ming
Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821)¹

INTRODUCTION

Along its history, documented from the early eighth century, Neidan 內丹 or Internal Alchemy has developed two main emblematic models of self-cultivation. The first is based on cultivating the mind and intends to remove the causes that prevent one from seeing one's "true nature." The second is based on purifying the main components of

¹ *Zhouyi chanzhen* (Uncovering the Truths of the *Book of Changes*), Introduction ("Juanshou" 卷首), 57a. — This article is a contribution to the research project on "Fate, Freedom and Prognostication," directed by Prof. Michael Lackner at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, University Erlangen-Nuremberg. I am deeply grateful to Shawn Cartwright, Philipp Hünnebeck, Terry Kleeman, and Song Xiaokun who, with their comments and remarks, have contributed to improve earlier drafts of this paper.

the human being; although the required practices differ among the various Neidan subtraditions, the process is said to be completed only when, in the final stage, one focuses on cultivating one's mind or spirit.

More details on these models of self-cultivation, and brief comments on why they are best seen as “emblematic,” will be found later in the present article. The main point to underline here is that the two models are traditionally said to give emphasis on Xing 性 and on Ming 命, respectively. Both terms are complex, of themselves and even more so in the context of Neidan. Xing can generally be understood and translated as “nature”—in the sense of “human nature,” “inner nature,” or “innate nature”—but Neidan texts also use this term in a sense identical or close to what certain Buddhist traditions call the Buddha-nature, in turn defined as one's fundamentally and constantly “awakened” state. Ming is in several respects an even more complex term. Even the three senses mentioned in the title of this essay—destiny, vital force, and existence—do not exhaust its range of meanings; they suffice, however, to raise the question of how these and other senses are related to one another, within and possibly also outside of Neidan.

As we shall see, Neidan works written at different times and belonging to different lineages not only repeat time and again that Xing and Ming should be understood in conjunction with one another; they also define the Xing-Ming dyad as the very foundation of Neidan. Xing and Ming are called, for instance, “the root and foundation of self-cultivation” (*xiuxing zhi genben* 修行之根本),² “the learning of the divine immortals” (*shenxian zhi xue* 神仙之學),³ “the

² “Xing and Ming are the root and foundation of self-cultivation.” Wang Zhe 王嘉 (Chongyang 重陽, 1113–70), attr., *Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun* (Fifteen Essays by Wang Chongyang to Establish the Teaching; DZ 1233), 4b.

³ “The learning of the divine immortals consists in nothing but cultivating and refining Xing and Ming.” Wang Jie 王玠 (Daoyuan 道淵, ?-ca. 1380), *Ruyao jing zhujie* (Commentary to the *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine*; DZ 135), preface. See Wang Jie, *Commentary on the Mirror for Compounding the Medicine: A Fourteenth-Century Work on Taoist Internal Alchemy*, 3.

essential for refining the Elixir” (*liandan zhi yao* 鍊丹之要),⁴ and even “the secret of the Golden Elixir” (*jindan zhi mi* 金丹之祕).⁵ The author of the statement quoted as epigraph to the present article writes elsewhere that cultivating Xing and Ming constitutes of its own “the Way of the Golden Elixir” (*jindan zhi dao* 金丹之道).⁶ A further indication of the prominence of Xing and Ming in Neidan is the presence of both words in the titles of several works, including the well-known *Xingming guizhi* 性命圭旨 (Principles of the Conjoined Cultivation of Nature and Existence).⁷

A thorough study of the views of Ming in Neidan should discuss how the Buddhist and the Neo-Confucian discourses on Xing and Ming contributed to form the Neidan views on both of these con-

⁴ “The essential for refining the Elixir consists only in the words Xing and Ming. Anything separate from Xing and Ming is a side gate.” Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1306), *Zhonghe ji* (Centrality and Harmony: An Anthology; DZ 249), 3.30a. The “side gates” (*pangmen* 旁門) are teachings and practices that, in the view of Li Daochun and many other Neidan masters, do not grant complete realization.

⁵ “The secret of the Golden Elixir consists only in one Xing, one Ming.” Qiu Chuji 邱處機 (1148–1227), attr., *Dadan zhizhi* (Straightforward Pointers on the Great Elixir; DZ 244), 2.10b.

⁶ “Indeed, the Way of the Golden Elixir consists in the Way of cultivating Xing and cultivating Ming.” Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821), *Wuzhen zhizhi* (Straightforward Pointers on the Awakening to Reality), 2.40a (commentary to “Jueju” 絕句, no. 42). Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290–ca. 1368) similarly writes: “The Way of the Golden Elixir is the Way of Xing and Ming” (金丹之道，是性命之道也); *Jindan dayao* (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir; DZ 1067), 14.13b.

⁷ On the title of the *Xingming guizhi* (attr. Yin zhenren 尹真人, seventeenth century) see note 37 below. Other works include: (1) *Xingming zongzhi* 性命宗指 (Ultimate Pointers on Xing and Ming), by Qianguan shanren 乾貫山人 (identity unknown), Ming dynasty. (2) *Xingming zhenyuan zhizhi* 性命真源直指 (Straightforward Pointers on the True Source of Xing and Ming), by Xue Xinxiang 薛心香, seventeenth/eighteenth century; ed. by Min Yide 閔一得 (1748–1836). (3) *Xingming weiyan* 性命微言 (Subtle Words on Xing and Ming), by Liu Yuan 劉沅 (1768–1855). (4) *Xingming yaozhi* 性命要旨 (Essential Directions on Xing and Ming), by Wang Qihuo 汪启濬 (1839–1917). (5) *Xingming fajue mingzhi* 性命法訣明指 (Model Instructions and Clear Pointers on Xing and Ming), by Zhao Bichen 趙避塵 (1860–after 1933).

cepts; and it should look at this whole subject against the background of the ideas of Xing and Ming in the earlier Chinese tradition, both Taoist and Confucian.⁸ The scope of this article is more limited. Although most of the sources that I quote also refer to Xing, and this term repeatedly comes forth in my discussion, my main focus here is on the Neidan views of Ming. In the first two sections, I look at the main terminological and doctrinal aspects of Ming. Sections 3 and 4 are concerned with the function of Xing and Ming in the two forms of Neidan self-cultivation mentioned above. Sections 5 and 6 examine two major themes pertaining to the views of Xing and Ming in Neidan. In the conclusion, I try to show how the different senses of Ming are related to one another in the Neidan views of the human being.

THE LANGUAGE OF MING IN NEIDAN

The two main dictionaries of the Chinese language report altogether more than two dozen meanings for *ming* 命 in premodern Chinese, the most important of which can be subsumed under four main groups:⁹

1. Order, command, mandate (in the context of government: decree, law, regulation, etc.); to order
2. Name, both in the nominal sense and in the verbal sense (to call, name, designate, denominate); to call, call out, hail
3. Fate, destiny, either assigned or determined by Heaven or in the generic senses of chance and good or ill fortune, in the absence of any obvious intention or design by a superior entity
4. Life, existence, either per se or in the more specific sense of life span, term/duration of life

⁸ On Neidan and Buddhism, see Ge Guolong, *Daojiao neidanxue suyuan*, 184–237; and with regard to Chan Buddhism, his *Daojiao neidanxue tanwei*, 110–30. On Neidan and Neo-Confucianism, see Robinet, *Introduction à l'alchimie intérieure taoïste*, 165–95 (esp. pp. 179–84 on Xing and Ming); and Crowe, “Dao Learning and the Golden Elixir: Shared Paths to Perfection.” On the background of the Neidan views in early Taoism and Confucianism see Li Dahua, *Shengming cunzai yu jingjie chaoyue*, 93–128.

⁹ *Hanyu dacidian*, 3:280–81; *Dai Kanwa jiten*, 2:2044.

While there is at least a partial overlap between the first and the third main senses (“order” and “destiny”), as well as between the third and the fourth senses (“destiny” and “life”), the second sense of *ming* (“name,” “to name”) might at first seem to be incongruous. Yet, as I will suggest in the conclusion of the present article, this sense also is relevant to the overall conception of Ming in Neidan.

An elaborate analysis of the different senses of *ming* is found in a study by Lisa Raphals, who has analyzed the semantic field of this term in the early Chinese tradition (drawing on sources dating, with few exceptions, through the third century BCE), and has identified eight main *topoi* on the basis of terms and expressions used in discussions of “fate.”¹⁰ I will not survey the semantic field of Ming in Neidan using Raphals’ template, if not else because the Neidan materials cannot match all of the categories that she has been able to identify. I will, however, point out which of the early views of Ming distinguished in her study correspond to those found in Neidan texts.¹¹

(1) *Ming as Life, Destiny, and Longevity*

In addition to the ambiguous compounds *shengming* 生命 and *shenming* 身命 (two of the generic words for “life” or “existence,” but also glossed as “destiny” in the standard dictionaries), Neidan texts use the term *ming* in nominal compounds that specifically refer either to destiny or to longevity. The former compounds include *tianming* 天命 (“Heaven’s mandate”) and *mingfen* 命分 (lit., “one’s decreed allotment” or “one’s mandated share”). The main and most frequent example of the latter compounds is *shouming* 壽命. This term fundamentally means “span of life” and not necessarily “longevity,” but it frequently appears in sentences stating that one’s Ming can be pro-

¹⁰ Raphals, “Languages of Fate: Semantic Fields in Chinese and Greek.” I refer especially to pp. 74–83 of this study, which continues with an analysis of comparable ideas in Han-dynasty sources and in early Greek thought.

¹¹ For this analysis, and for other parts of the present article, I have worked on a digital corpus of about 300 texts, consisting of almost all Neidan sources found in the *Daozang* and a selection of major Neidan works dating from the Ming and the Qing periods. However, to avoid an overabundance of references, I will draw my examples mainly from authors and texts also quoted for other purposes in this article.

longed (*chang* 長, *changjiu* 長久), increased (*zeng* 增), and extended (*yan* 延), and can even become “boundless” and “unlimited” (*wuqiong* 無窮, *wuji* 無極).

Taken per se, the senses of “destiny” and “longevity” respectively correspond to Raphals’ “Ming as command” (destiny as determined by Heaven or by a deity) and “Ming *ab initio*” (“something predetermined at birth or inception”).¹² However, Neidan texts make one point immediately clear: both the Ming received by Heaven and the Ming *ab initio* are subject to mutation, either in a negative sense (because of negligence or of the inevitable shift from the *xiantian* 先天 to the *houtian* 後天, the precelestial and the postcelestial domains) or in a positive sense (mainly through the Neidan practice). This view bears a significant consequence: the possibility that something predetermined can be altered shows that the Neidan discourse on Ming runs on two parallel but different routes. On the one hand, the subject of the discourse is Ming as originally conferred by Heaven (or by the highest “superior entity,” the Dao itself) and as received *ab initio*; on the other hand, the subject is Ming as it manifests itself during the course of one’s life, or—since that could be a tautology—Ming *as* the course of one’s life. As we shall see, certain Neidan traditions also postulate a similar dual structure for Xing or Nature.

These two aspects of Ming are kept distinct in Neidan sources. This is shown, in particular, by the term *yuanming* 元命, which can be provisionally translated as “original mandate.” This term—sometimes paired with *benxing* 本性 or “fundamental nature”—implies the view of a primal or initial Ming, distinguished from a Ming that is posterior to it either in time, or in status, or both—and that just for this reason is deemed to be secondary or inferior. In an even clearer way, Neidan texts insist on the necessity of “returning” to one’s Ming, an expression discussed below that involves, in the first place, the possibility that one’s original Ming is neglected, forgotten, or even lost.

(2) *Ming Endangered*

The third *topos* mentioned by Raphals is “choosing Ming,” or “fate as subject to the exercise of human choice and free will.”¹³ The com-

¹² Raphals, “Languages of Fate,” 74.

¹³ Raphals, *ibid.*

Superior Virtue, Inferior Virtue

A Doctrinal Theme in the Works of the Taoist Master Liu Yiming (1734–1821) ¹

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In several works belonging to his extensive literary corpus, the Taoist master Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) discusses two aspects of Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy, called *shangde* 上德, or “superior virtue,” and *xiade* 下德, or “inferior virtue.” According to Liu Yiming, superior virtue focuses on the cultivation of Xing 性, or inner nature, while inferior virtue focuses on the cultivation of Ming 命, a term that in its broadest sense denotes one’s embodiment and the destiny, or “mandate,” assigned by Heaven to one’s existence. Although these two aspects, or degrees, of Neidan are addressed to and accessible by different types of adepts, Liu Yiming emphasizes that, if the path of inferior virtue is fully achieved, it leads to the same state of realization as the path of superior virtue.

This article surveys the Liu Yiming’s teachings on this subject and their background. As we shall see, substantially equivalent views on these two aspects of Neidan are also expounded by earlier masters, even when they refer to them using terms different from “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue.” In addition, the view that Neidan

¹ This article is a contribution to the research project “Fate, Freedom and Prognostication,” directed by Prof. Michael Lackner at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, University Erlangen-Nuremberg. I am indebted to Catherine Despeux and Grégoire Espeset for their insightful comments on earlier drafts. Any error of perspective or detail is entirely my responsibility.

comprises two aspects, or degrees, is closely connected to the historical development of this tradition: after the creation of the Northern and the Southern lineages (Beizong 北宗 and Nanzong 南宗), some masters associated the two “virtues” with their emblematic models of self-cultivation, respectively focused on Xing and Ming. From this point of view, Liu Yiming gathers ideas transmitted within the earlier Neidan tradition, but formulates them in a more articulate way, especially with regard to the roles played by “non-doing” and “doing” (*wuwei* 無為 and *youwei* 有為) in the Neidan practices, and to the distinction between the precelestial and postcelestial domains (*xiantian* 先天 and *houtian* 後天).

Born in the Quwo 曲沃 district of Pingyang 平陽 (present-day Linfen 臨汾, Shanxi), Liu Yiming was an eleventh-generation master of the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage and the virtual creator of one of its northern branches. Having recovered from severe illness in his youth, he began extended traveling that led him to meet his two main masters, whom he calls the Old Man of the Kangu Valley (Kangu Laoren 龕谷老人, met in 1760 or slightly earlier) and the Great Man Resting in Immortality (Xianliu Zhangren 仙留丈人, met in 1772). In 1780, Liu Yiming visited the Qiyun 棲雲 mountains in Jincheng 金城 (present-day Yuzhong 榆中, Gansu) and settled there. Since then until his death he devoted himself to teaching and writing. In addition to his little-known commentary to the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), the main sources of the present study are found in his *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種 (Twelve Books on the Dao), which despite its title contains twenty works and represents one of the main instances of an integral exposition of doctrines in the history of Neidan.²

² For additional information on Liu Yiming's works see note 44 below. The main studies on Liu Yiming are Liu Ning, *Liu Yiming xiudao sixiang yanjiu*; Liu Zhongyu, *Liu Yiming xue'an*; and Jia Laisheng, *Tiejian daoyi: Liu Yiming dazhuan*. An introduction to Liu Yiming's views on Neidan is found in my “Discriminations in Cultivating the Tao: Liu Yiming (1734–1821) and His *Xiuzhen houbian*.”

SUPERIOR VIRTUE AND INFERIOR VIRTUE
IN THE *DAODE JING*

The starting point of the Neidan discourse on superior virtue and inferior virtue is a passage in the *Daode jing*, sec. 38, which defines the difference between the two kinds of “virtue” as follows:

上德不德，是以有德，下德不失德，是以無德。上德無為，而無以為，下德為之，而有以為。

Superior virtue is not virtuous,
thus it has virtue;
inferior virtue does not lack virtue,
thus it has no virtue.

Superior virtue has no doing —
there is nothing whereby it does;
inferior virtue does —
there is something whereby it does.

This passage, which in early versions of the *Daode jing* opened the whole text,³ has been interpreted and translated in different ways—in particular, by understanding its main subject not only as “virtue” per se, but also as “the man” or “the person” of superior or inferior virtue, and by rendering *de* 德 as “power,” “potency,” “integrity,” and in other ways. While these different readings and translations should not be overlooked, with regard to our present subject “virtue” defines, in this passage, two types of inner attainment and outer operation (or “efficacy,” *gong* 功). Superior virtue “has virtue” because “it is not virtuous”: it does not intentionally pursue virtue and does not intend to comply with any set model of virtue. This virtue “does nothing” and—a point especially important for our present subject—“there is nothing whereby it does”: one uses nothing in order to seek or display virtue. Inferior virtue, instead, “has no virtue” because “it does not lack virtue”: it deliberately seeks and displays virtuous attainment and operation, and this requires intentional action. This virtue “does” and “there is something whereby it does”: one uses something in order

³ Sec. 38 is found at the beginning of the “De” 德 portion of the text, which is placed before the “Dao” 道 portion in both Mawangdui manuscripts dating from ca. 200 BCE or slightly later.

to attain or exhibit virtuous behavior. The concept of “using nothing” or “using something” is important in the Neidan views of superior and inferior virtue. As we shall see, according to Liu Yiming, in inferior virtue one “borrows the postcelestial in order to return to the precelestial,” while in superior virtue one only “cultivates the precelestial in order to transform the postcelestial.”

What the *Daode jing* means by “doing” is exemplified in the next sentences of this passage, which concern three main types of ordinary virtue, namely benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), and propriety (*li* 禮). The sentences on benevolence and righteousness deserve attention, as Liu Yiming will refer to them in one of his writings on superior and inferior virtue. The *Daode jing* says:

上仁為之，而無以為。上義為之，而有以為。

Superior benevolence does —
there is nothing whereby it does;
superior righteousness does —
there is something whereby it does.

Even in their “superior” (*shang* 上) forms, both benevolence and righteousness are forms of “doing,” but they differ from one another with regard to their means and ends. Benevolence has “nothing whereby it does”: it is performed intentionally, but neither because of something nor as a means to obtain something. Righteousness, instead, has “something whereby it does”: it is performed with a motive and for a purpose. As for the third type of virtue, namely propriety, it is the lowest one:

上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。

Superior propriety does—if no one responds to it,
it rolls up its sleeves and attacks them.

Propriety—the standards that regulate relations among members of society, especially according to their hierarchical status—expects an appropriate response from the others. If this response does not come, says the *Daode jing*, it makes a show of strength (“rolls up its sleeves”) and forces compliance to the rules.

This part of *Daode jing* 38 is concluded by a well-known passage:

故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

Therefore after the Dao is lost there is virtue,
 after virtue is lost there is benevolence,
 after benevolence is lost there is righteousness,
 after righteousness is lost there is propriety.

As its words make clear, this final passage describes a sequence of progressively declining stages, through which operating in accordance with the highest principle—the Dao—is replaced with lower types of virtue, based on adherence to ethical or to conventional rules of behavior.

Much more should be said about this section of the *Daode jing*—in particular, about its evident criticism of dominant, “Confucian” models of virtue, and about the multiple senses of the word *de* 德.⁴ Let it suffice to say here that, in the context of the *Daode jing* and of certain later Taoist traditions, *de* denotes in the first place the unlimited potentiality of the Dao, and especially its faculty to manifest or not manifest itself as well as its mode of operation in manifestation—for example, by generating, nourishing, and equalizing the “ten thousand things” (*Daode jing* 34, 51, 77, etc.). In all these cases, the single principle that the Dao can be said to follow is “being so of its own” (*ziran* 自然, 25), a principle that it fulfills by “not doing” (34, 37, 73). The saints (or sages, *shengren* 聖人) and the realized persons (*zhenren* 真人) model their operation on the operation of the Dao, and thus share, within the limits imposed by the domain in which they operate, the same unlimited potentiality. This is the “mysterious *de*” (*xuande* 玄德), an expression that the *Daode jing* applies—using exactly the same words—both to the Dao (51) and to those who operate in complete accordance with it (10):

生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。

Generating without owning,
 doing without depending,

⁴ On this subject, see Barnwell, “The Evolution of the Concept of *De* 德 in Early China,” esp. 37 ff. on the *Daode jing*. While “virtue” is by no means an accurate rendering of *de*, this translation does offer the advantage of using a single term to render *de* whether—to use the examples given by A.C. Graham—it is meant in the sense of “virtue is its own reward” or of “the virtue of cyanide is to poison.” See Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, 13. Graham usually translated *de* as “potency.”

letting grow without managing:
this is called Mysterious Virtue.

To summarize what we have seen above and to return to our present subject, two main points deserve attention. The first is that the *Daode jing* defines superior and inferior virtue in relation to “non-doing” and “doing,” respectively. The second point is that the way of “non-doing” does not use—and does not require—anything in order to be fulfilled (“there is nothing whereby it does”). The way of “doing,” instead, involves using “something” as a means and with intention (“there is something whereby it does”). An analogous distinction between “non-doing” and “doing” is at the basis of the discourse about superior and inferior virtue in Neidan.

“NON-DOING” AND “DOING”: THE TWO WAYS OF THE CANTONG QI

The *Daode jing* has been the object of commentaries by several authors of Neidan works.⁵ In addition to Liu Yiming, whose notes on *Daode jing* 38 will be discussed below, these authors include Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194–1229?), Li Daochun 李道純 (late thirteenth century), He Daoquan 何道全 (1319?–1399), Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520–1606), and Huang Yuanji 黃元吉 (mid-nineteenth century). None of them, however, relates the two types of “virtue” mentioned in *Daode jing* 38 to Neidan. The reason seems clear: in the way of seeing of these and other masters, explaining the *Daode jing* in light of Neidan would be impossible. Only the opposite procedure is practicable, as it is the *Daode jing* that provides elements of doctrine, which Neidan applies within its own domain.⁶

⁵ See the essay no. 1 in the present volume, pp. 9–14.

⁶ For these authors’ comments on *Daode jing* 38, see Bai Yuchan, *Daode baozhang* (The Precious Stanzas of *The Way and Its Virtue*), 2.1a-b; Li Daochun, *Daode huiyuan* (Comprehending the Origins of *The Way and Its Virtue*; DZ 699), 2.1a-b; He Daoquan, *Taishang Laozi Daode jing shuzhu* (Commentary to the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue* by the Most High Laozi), 2.1a-3b; Lu Xixing, *Daode jing xuanlan* (Looking Through the Mysteries of the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*), 335–37; and Huang Yuanji, *Daode jing jingyi* (The Essential Meaning of the *Book of the Way and Its*

Seeking Immortality in Ge Hong's *Baopu zi neipian*

Originally published with the same title in David Chai, ed., *Dao Companion to Xuanxue* 玄學 (*Neo-Daoism*), 427–56 (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2020).

Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) is one of the main figures in the history of Taoism. Born near present-day Nanjing into a family of the southern aristocracy, which had provided officials to the state administration for at least ten generations before him, he became a disciple of the Taoist master, 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. His main work, the *Baopu zi* 抱朴子 (The Master Who Embraces Simplicity), is divided into the twenty *Inner Chapters* (*Neipian* 內篇), mainly devoted to discussions of Taoist ideas and practices, and the fifty *Outer Chapters* (*Waipian* 外篇), dealing with the “discourses of the literati” (*rushuo* 儒說). In addition, Ge Hong is ascribed with some sixty works on classical exegesis, dynastic and local history, Taoist thought, alchemy, medicine, numerology, hagiography, and various other subjects. No more than a dozen of those works are extant, and only two of them may indeed have been written by him, namely the *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Biographies of the Divine Immortals) and the medical text, *Zhouhou beiji fang* 肘後備急方 (Recipes for Emergencies to Keep at Hand).¹

¹ A detailed “chronological biography” (*nianpu* 年譜) of Ge Hong is found in Chen Feilong, *Ge Hong zhi wenlun ji qi shengping*, 47–94. The autobiography found in the last chapter of the *Waipian* is also included by Wang Ming 王明 as an appendix to his edition of the *Neipian*, which is at the basis of the present article. Translations are found in Ware, *Alchemy, Medi-*

Although Ge Hong has often been called “the greatest Chinese alchemist” or in similar ways, he states twice in his work that he had never compounded an elixir.² His figure as an alchemist is largely a creation of Taoist hagiography and was endorsed by Confucian literati. Nonetheless, the *Inner Chapters*, with which the present essay is concerned, provides unique insights into the intellectual and religious traditions of Ge Hong’s time. Although he was not a master of any of those traditions—his main concern, as we shall see, was the acceptance of that legacy by other literati—Ge Hong’s account makes the *Inner Chapters* an essential source for the study of early Taoism, especially due to the background information it provides on several concepts, beliefs, and practices, and to the large number of quotations from early sources, most of which are now lost.

The figure at the center of the *Inner Chapters* is the “immortal” (*xian* 仙 or *xianren* 仙人), a term that has multiple connotations in Ge Hong’s usage, ranging from a person who has transcended the limits of human existence to a person who might be more plainly called a “sage.”³ Both of these senses should be taken into account to understand Ge Hong’s views. To appreciate this aspect of his thought, two earlier essays on the *Inner Chapters* are especially valuable. In a study that goes much beyond the subject announced in its title, Lai Chi-tim has explored the expansion of the range of issues debated by literati after the Han period. Lai calls attention to several points, closely related to one another. As he remarks, the decline of Han-dynasty Confucian orthodoxy prompted enquiries “into the transcendent and eternal realm beyond the natural world.” Six Dynasties literati, as a consequence, “became more conscious of enquiring the

cine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P’ien of Ko Hung, 6–21, and in Che, *La Voie des Divins Immortels: Les chapitres discursifs du Baopu zi neipian*, 31–51. See also Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 13–17, which presents a biography of Ge Hong in the introduction to his translation of the *Shenxian zhuan*. On the works attributed to Ge Hong see Chen, *Ge Hong zhi wenlun ji qi shengping*, 143–98.

² *Baopu zi neipian* (hereafter *Baopu zi*), 4.71 (Ware, 70) and 16.283 (Ware, 262).

³ I have opted to translate *xian* and *xianren* as “immortal” rather than “transcendent” in this essay. As we shall see, according to Ge Hong the *xian* “do not die as ordinary people do.” Whether he understands deathlessness in a physical sense is an issue I discuss below.

ground of one's 'natural' self-identity regardless of the existing 'social' identity." As part of this process, literati became increasingly aware of "the issue of the transience of human life."⁴ These issues were actually not only of concern to Confucian literati: they also informed—and paved the way for—the development of intellectual and religious trends within Taoism and Buddhism in Six Dynasties and later times. In fact, one might add a further point to those mentioned by Lai: the same developments resulted in the creation of multiple instances of self-cultivation praxis that are not strictly limited to ethical and moral refinement, but require in addition the performance of practices focused on the mind, the body, or both. Within this broad context, a new view of immortality emerged, which differs from the earlier beliefs in beings who live in far-away paradises, and the cults addressed to them, and instead is "only dependent upon ascetic, mystic, and ethical behavior."⁵ Lai suggests that Ge Hong takes as his own ideal the so-called "earthly immortal," a transcendent being who, instead of ascending to Heaven, opts for living among fellow human beings. This immortal "is the opposite of the Confucian sage" in the classical sense but, like the Confucian sage, performs a beneficial function within human society.⁶

The figure of the "sage" is at the center of another important essay on Ge Hong, which shares several underlying points with Lai's study despite the different focus. As Michael Puett shows, Ge Hong's sage is a human being provided with exceptional capabilities (acquired primarily through study) that he uses in order to devise methods through which other people may cultivate themselves. There follows—as we shall see in the first part of the present essay—that in Ge Hong's view Confucius is not the only sage, and that sagehood cannot be limited to what is written in the Confucian classics. Ge Hong presents himself as a "new sage," or rather as "the sage of his day." He expounds this new view of sagehood in a voluminous work in two parts (the *Inner* and the *Outer Chapters*) that attempts to combine aspects of the Confucian heritage with parts of the body of technical traditions that developed during the late Warring States and

⁴ Lai, "Ko Hung's Discourse of *Hsien*-Immortality: A Taoist Configuration of an Alternate Ideal Self-Identity," 186–92.

⁵ Id., 199.

⁶ Id., 210–11.

the Han period. As Puett notes, in expanding the scope of the figure of the sage, Ge Hong's views bear analogies with those of Wang Chong 王充 (27–97 CE).⁷

In this essay, I look at the ways in which Ge Hong frames his discourse on immortality. Taking into account Ge Hong's intended audience is essential for this task. Ge Hong's work is not addressed to Taoists, in whatever way they might be defined. The greatest part of the *Inner Chapters* is framed as a series of imaginary dialogues in which Ge Hong enters into a conversation, with an attitude that is firm, but not polemical, with an "interlocutor" who in fact, might best be seen as Ge Hong's own Confucian *alter ego*. As we shall see, the key point made by Ge Hong is probably the only angle under which an ordinary Confucian might have accepted his entire discourse: attaining immortality depends on one's destiny and is ultimately owed to the "mandate of Heaven" (*tianming* 天命). That destiny should be fulfilled, and the teachings and practices concerning immortality are the means to fulfill it. The *Inner Chapters* is devoted to the illustration of this thesis.⁸

SAGEHOOD, IMMORTALITY, AND DESTINY

Ge Hong's discussion of immortality is tightly integrated with his views of sagehood and destiny: immortality is an aspect of sagehood, and whether one is committed to the search of transcendence unique-

⁷ See Puett, "Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity: Ge Hong's *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi*)," esp. 102–4 on the figure of the sage, 111–12 on the integration of two bodies of knowledge, and 109–10 on the analogies with Wang Chong.

⁸ Except for the final quotation, all translations from the *Inner Chapters* in this essay are mine. However, I provide references to the complete English translation by James Ware cited earlier, and (where relevant) to the partial French translation by Philippe Che, *La Voie des Divins Immortels: Les chapitres discursifs Baopuzi neipian*. In Che's definition, the "discursive chapters" are those in which Ge Hong focuses on general matters, such as the search of immortality, instead of alchemy, meditation, and other technical subjects. — In addition to these translations, and to the studies quoted in the previous footnotes, I have benefited from several other works; in particular, Murakami, *Hōbokushi*, and Hu, *Wei-Jin shenxian dao-jiao: Baopu zi neipian yanjiu*.

ly depends on destiny. Before we approach the main subject of this essay, it is important to clarify this aspect of Ge Hong's thought.

According to Ge Hong, there is more than one kind of sage (*shengren* 聖人). In the main discussion of this subject, his interlocutor challenges him by saying that, if immortality could be attained, then all sages would be immortals. The fact that Confucius and the Duke of Zhou were not immortals proves that immortality is unattainable. Ge Hong responds that not all sages are immortals, and not all immortals are sages in the sense meant by his opponent. Only a few persons would be able to devote themselves at once to the affairs of the world and the search of transcendence. However, he continues, sagehood has different aspects and applications, and the art of government is only one of the skills that qualifies one as a sage. As he shows with several examples, the title "sage" is also granted to anyone who excels in one particular domain: history, medicine, divination, painting, sculpture, music, military strategy, and several other pursuits.⁹

When the interlocutor disagrees with this view, maintaining that sagehood instead "should embrace all and form a whole," Ge Hong replies that sagehood, on the contrary, "is divisible" (*you poupan* 有剖判). He supports this argument with two examples that his opponent could hardly dismiss. In the *Mengzi* 孟子 we read that each of Confucius' disciples obtained only one part of the Master's sagehood.¹⁰ Moreover, the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) states that sagehood has four different facets: speaking the right words, achieving good results, conforming to models, and producing correct prognostications.¹¹ One, therefore, may be a sage in a particular field of expertise. If this understanding of sagehood is rejected, Ge Hong concludes, then even Confucius and the Duke of Zhou, who were prominent in the art of government but not in other domains, should not be called "sages."¹²

⁹ *Baopu zi*, 12.224–25 (Ware, 200–2; Che, 157–59).

¹⁰ *Mengzi*, 3.2 (Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2:193).

¹¹ *Yijing*, "Xici" 繫辭 (Appended Sayings), A.IX (Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 314). In all four of these actions, according to the "Xici," one should follow the words and images of the *Book of Changes*.

¹² *Baopu zi*, 12.225–26 (Ware, 202–3; Che, 159–60). On this part of Ge Hong's discourse, see also Lai, "Ko Hung's Discourse of *Hsien*-Immortality,"

Whether one does or does not attain the status of “sage” in any particular pursuit is owed to destiny. Ge Hong maintains that individual fate, including the predestination for immortality, is something received as a “natural endowment” (*ziran suo bing* 自然所稟) in accordance with the star (or “asterism, constellation,” *xiu* 宿) under which one is conceived. He illustrates this concept with a quotation from the now-lost *Yuqian jing* 玉鈴經 (Book of the Jade Seal):

人之吉凶，制在結胎受氣之日，皆上得列宿之精。其值聖宿則聖，值賢宿則賢，值文宿則文，值武宿則武，值貴宿則貴，值富宿則富，值賤宿則賤，值貧宿則貧，值壽宿則壽，值仙宿則仙。

A man’s good and bad fortunes take form on the day the embryo is formed and receives its *qi*: everyone receives the essence (*jing*) of an asterism above. If one happens to be in conjunction (*zhi*) with the sagehood asterism, one becomes a sage; with the worthiness asterism, a worthy man; with the civil asterism, a man of the civil arts; with the military asterism, a man of the military arts; with the honors asterism, an honored man; with the riches asterism, a rich man; with the humbleness asterism, a humble man; with the poverty asterism, a poor man; with the longevity asterism, a man of long life; with the immortality asterism, an immortal.¹³

Various mixed destinies can also occur (for instance, being honored but not rich or being rich but not honored), but the main point is that here, according to Ge Hong, lies the meaning of the “mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*) with regard to individual existence. With another argument that few Confucians could challenge, Ge Hong states that only the mandate of Heaven can explain whether one is or is not destined to become an immortal:

211, and Puett, “Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity,” 102–5. On the intellectual and historical context of Ge Hong’s view of destiny, see Lo, “Destiny and Retribution in Early Medieval China.”

¹³ *Baopu zi*, 12.226 (Ware, 203–4; Che, 160). The extant text entitled *Yuqian jing* seems to have little or nothing in common with the work known to Ge Hong. Other quotations from this work, which was quite influential for Ge Hong, are found in 3.53–54 (see the discussion below) and 17.301–2 (Ware, 284).

Pages 253-288 are not included in this sample

Taoism and Divination

Originally published as “Daoism and Divination” in Michael Lackner and Zhao Lu, eds., *Handbook of Divination and Prognostication in China*, part 1: *Introduction to the Field*, 364–412 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2022).

The “Procedures Concerning the Administration of Taoist Monasteries and Temples,” first formulated by the China Taoist Association (Zhongguo Daojiao xiehui 中國道教協會) in 1988 and officially issued in 1992, states in one of its sections:

宮觀內不得搞跳神、趕鬼、看相、算命、測字、卜卦、看風水、扶乩等擾亂社會治安和騙人詐才、危害人民身心健康的封建迷信活動。

Within monasteries and temples it is forbidden to practice feudal superstitious activities, including performing trance dances, exorcism, physiognomy, “fate calculation” (*suanming*), glyptomancy (*cezi*, divination through the analysis of written characters), divination by means of trigrams and hexagrams, topomancy (*fengshui*), and spirit-writing (*fuji*), which upset public security, defraud people, and harm the population’s physical and mental health.¹

In the current statute, issued in 2010 and modified in 2015, this rule is phrased differently, but the wording is still broad enough to include the mantic arts.² Both versions would suggest that Taoism—under the

¹ “Zhongguo Daojiao xiehui guanyu Daojiao gongguan banfa 中国道教协会关于道教宫观管理办法.” This document was published in the journal of the China Taoist Association, *Zhongguo Daojiao* 中国道教 1992.4.

² The current statute does not mention particular divination techniques and does not use the word “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信). Emphasis instead is

control of the Chinese government and in agreement with it—not only prohibits the use of divination within its main institutions, but also dissociates itself from the mantic arts as a whole. Yet, while this is in several cases true, we also know that Taoism and various forms of divination have been in a close, though often controversial, relationship for almost two millennia.

This relationship has been noticed and discussed by several scholars. As Mark Csikszentmihalyi remarks, “the Taoist religion in both its worldview and practices derives to a large extent from the cosmology and mantic practices of the Han dynasty.”³ The historical and intellectual relation between the techniques of the Han-dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) *fangshi* 方士, or “masters of the methods,” and some later Taoist practices has also been repeatedly pointed out. With regard to the works cited in relevant sections of the bibliographic chapters of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty), Csikszentmihalyi continues:

Many of the practices outlined in the texts also appear in later Daoist collections. This is true of two areas in particular: the complex of medical and immortality techniques and the techniques for determining auspiciousness that involve spirits and demons. . . . The Han interest in evaluating the best time or day for a given activity is at the center of the “Numerical Algorithms and Techniques” [*shushu* 數術] category, and some of these techniques also overlap with those found in later Daoist texts. The twelve spirits of the cosmic board [*shi* 式] are connected with the calendar in several texts in the Daoist Canon.⁴

placed on “illegal and illicit activities” (*weifa luanji huodong* 違法亂紀活動), effectively delegating the whole matter to the PRC laws and regulations (both national and local) on this subject. As of this writing, the current statute is published under the title “Daojiao gongguan banfa 道教宮觀管理辦法” in the website of the Chinese Taoist Association (taoist.org.cn), in the section “Rules and Regulations for the Chinese Taoist World” (“Zhongguo Daojiao-jie guizhang zhidu 中國道教界規章制度”). I am grateful to several colleagues who have helped me to identify these sources.

³ Csikszentmihalyi, “Han Cosmology and Mantic Practices,” 53.

⁴ Ibid., 65. On the divination works cited in the *Hanshu* and other works, see Kalinowski, “Typology and Classification of the Mantic Arts in

With the class of practitioners designed as *fangshi*—a general definition of experts in various techniques, from divination and astronomy to medicine and “immortality practices”—we are indeed close to what Taoism would become in later times: rather than the “shaman” (with his or her ecstasies and trances), the diviner (who often fashions a “rational” world relying on images and emblems with precise meanings and functions) may be seen as the predecessor of the Taoist master and the Taoist priest—although, as we shall see, this is precisely one of the reasons of the Taoist conflict with divination.⁵ Similarly, Isabelle Robinet noticed with regard to the Taoist ritual space that “the schematic structure of this world is exactly the same as that found in the divination tablets [*shi* 式] of the Han . . . [Taoist] ritual can thus be seen as drawing directly from the calendrical computations and speculations of the Han.”⁶ As Anna Seidel demonstrated in a masterful work, the roots of Taoism in the Han-dynasty “weft texts” (*weishu* 緯書, or “apocrypha”) are another component showing that Taoism was ready to integrate several forms of divination and prognostication into its practices.⁷

This integration did indeed occur, and not only in domains proximate to religious cults and ritual practices. To give a few examples, Yan Zun 嚴遵 (first century BCE), one of the earliest known commentators of the *Laozi* 老子, was a professional diviner;⁸ and more than one millennium later, the same is true of Hao Datong 郝大通 (1140–1213), an early master of the Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Reality) branch of Taoism.⁹ The gift of predicting the future is one of the powers of Taoist immortals,¹⁰ and even Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao, Laozi in his divine aspect) is said, in the earliest source that concerns him, to “observe the heavens and make prophecies” (*guantian zuochen* 觀天

China.” See also Kalinowski, “Technical Traditions in Ancient China and *Shushu* Culture in Chinese Religion,” and Raphals, “Divination in the *Han Shu* Bibliographic Treatise.”

⁵ For remarks on the figures of shaman, the diviner, and the Taoist priest, see Lagerwey, “Écriture et corps divin,” 282–83.

⁶ Robinet, *Taoism*, 170.

⁷ See Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments.”

⁸ Chan, “The *Daode jing* and Its Tradition,” 12.

⁹ Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature*, 165. Both Yan Zun and Hao Datong were versed in divination through the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes).

¹⁰ Penny, “Immortality and Transcendence,” 125–26.

作識).¹¹ Yet, as we shall see, Taoism and divination have often been in a conflictual relationship, culminating in the outright rejection and even the prohibition of the mantic arts.

The present essay attempts to survey some of the main sources, subjects, and issues relevant to the relation of Taoism to divination. The first section is concerned with divination techniques represented in texts of the *Daozang* 道藏, or Taoist Canon. The subsequent sections examine different attitudes towards divination in the history of Taoism, ranging from integration to compromise to interdiction. In the conclusion, I return to some of the main points discussed in the article. The appendix contains short notes on works on divination included in the Canon and in other collections of Taoist texts.

Despite their importance, I will not deal with other themes relevant to this subject. Most important among them is the uses of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) in Taoism, a vast subject that requires more than one separate study.¹² I also do not deal with prophecy, apocalypse, and millenarianism, three major interrelated subjects in the history of Taoism from the beginning of our era until at least the seventh century;¹³ with “spirit-writing” (*fujī* 扶乩), which is at the origins of several Taoist texts from the Qing period onwards and possibly earlier;¹⁴ with dream divination;¹⁵ and with other minor

¹¹ See the translations of the *Laozi ming* 老子銘 (Inscription for Laozi) in Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoïsme des Han*, 123, and Csikszentmihalyi, *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*, 107.

¹² In addition to Kalinowski, “La littérature divinatoire dans le *Daozang*,” 86–89, for brief notes on *Daozang* sources on the *Book of Changes* see Schipper and Verellen, *The Taoist Canon*, esp. 1:79–82 and 2:746–51. The main work on this subject is Zhan Shichuang, *Yixue yu Daojiao sixiang guanxi yanjiu*. Surveys of the Taoist literature on the *Changes* and of the uses of the *Changes* in the Taoist ritual traditions are also found in Liu Shaojun, “*Daozang*, *Xu Daozang*, *Zangwai daoshu* zhong Yixue zhuzuo tiyao,” and Chen Yaoting, “*Daojiao keyi he Yili*,” respectively.

¹³ On prophecy, see Bokenkamp, “Prophecies and Prognostication”; Seidel, “Taoist Messianism”; Mollier, *Une apocalypse taoïste du Ve siècle*; and the detailed treatment of portents in Hendrichske, “Divination in the *Taiping jing*,” 9–17.

¹⁴ On spirit-writing see the studies collected in the volume edited by Matthias Schumann and Elena Valussi, *Communicating with the Gods: Spirit-Writing in Chinese History and Society*. For introductory but depend-

prognostication practices in some ways related to Taoism, such as the use of the “divination blocks” (*gao* 筮).¹⁶

Despite these and other limitations, this contribution will fulfill its main purpose if it helps to shed light on a simple but significant point: not only Taoist textual materials, but especially the Taoist views on divination—including those that are critical or thoroughly adverse—should be taken into account for an understanding of divination, its history, and its techniques in China.¹⁷

MANTIC ARTS IN THE TAOIST CANON

As shown in the appendix to the present article, at least three dozen texts in the *Daozang* are entirely or substantially devoted to different divination techniques, including three varieties of calendrical divination, astrology, topomancy, physiognomy, meteoromancy, and divination by oracle slips. The present section contains brief notes on these techniques and provides, for some of them, examples of their uses in Taoism.

(1) *Hemerology*

Hemerology (*zeri* 擇日, “selecting days”) appears to be the only instance of a divination technique incorporated into Taoist practices

able remarks on this subject in relation to Taoism, see also Esposito, “Daoism in the Qing,” 648–50.

¹⁵ On this subject, see Lin Fushi, “Religious Taoism and Dreams,” and the remarkable book edited by Zhan Shichuang, *Meng yu Dao* (I am grateful to Dimitri Drettas for bringing this work to my attention). It is worthwhile to add that the Taoist views of dreams include aspects that go beyond divination; see Radpour, “Daoist Views of the Dream State.”

¹⁶ While the faithful ordinarily use this simple divination tool by themselves when they visit temples and shrines, Adeline Herrou reports an interesting case in which a Taoist monk uses it in order to draw a *Yijing* hexagram on behalf of another person. See Herrou, *La vie entre soi*, 351.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Michael Lackner, who in the past several years has taught me much about the intellectual foundations of divination in China, and to Marc Kalinowski, who has read and patiently discussed with me an earlier draft of this article and has encouraged me to complete it. Needless to say, any error of perspective or detail is entirely my responsibility.

without major adjustments, providing in this way “the knowledge, needed for all religious activities, of auspicious and unlucky days.”¹⁸ Examples of its use are numerous. In early times, the identification of propitious times was deemed to be indispensable for Taoist practitioners in order to begin their periods of retirement and practice, the literal or metaphoric “entrance into the mountain” (*rushan* 入山). The intent was not the identification of lucky days in a generic sense, but especially of days that ensure support by benevolent deities and protection from evil entities: a practitioner who “enters the mountain” without selecting an auspicious time would be punished by the spirits.¹⁹ In the “Inner Chapters” (“Neipian 内篇”) of his *Baopu zi* 抱朴子 (The Master Who Embraces Simplicity), Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) mentions several calendrical interdictions.²⁰ A related major source of early medieval Taoism contains more examples, including the following one:

入山水之日，當以保日及義日、專日，大吉，易得道。以制日、伐日入山，必死。

To enter a mountain or [cross] a watercourse, the protective (*bao*), righteous (*yi*) and responsible (*zhuan*) days are very auspicious; you will easily attain the Dao. If you enter a mountain on a controlled (*zhi*) or a subdued (*fa*) day, you will certainly die.²¹

Another hemerological method used in association with early Taoist practices was based on the so-called *wangxiang* 王相 (ruler and minister) relation between celestial stems and earthly branches (*tian-gan* 天干 and *dizhi* 地支). Examples of its application include the

¹⁸ Robinet, *Taoism*, 93. On Taoism and hemerology, see Kalinowski, “La littérature divinatoire,” 95–103; Sakade, “Divination as Daoist Practice,” 547–49 and 557–58; Andersen, “Talking to the Gods,” 6–8; Hendrichske, “Divination in the *Taiping jing*,” 43–44.

¹⁹ *Baopu zi neipian* (Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity; hereafter *Baopu zi*), 17.299 (see Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of A.D. 320*, 280).

²⁰ *Baopu zi*, 17.301 (Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 283).

²¹ *Lingbao wufu xu* (Prolegomena to the Five Talismans of the Most High Numinous Treasure; DZ 388), 3.8b–9a. See also the similar passage in *Baopu zi*, 17.303 (Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 286–87). The earliest description of this hemerological method is found in the *Huainan zi*, 3.277–78; see Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought*, 131–32.

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- Ruyao jing zhujie* 入藥鏡注解 [Commentary to the *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine*]. Text attributed to Cui Xifan 崔希範 (ca. 880–940); comm. by Wang Jie 王玠 (Wang Daoyuan 王道淵, ?-ca. 1380). DZ 135.

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