

# THE WAY OF THE GOLDEN ELIXIR

A Historical Overview  
of Taoist Alchemy



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## INTRODUCTION

Chinese alchemy has a history of more than two thousand years, recorded from the 2nd century BCE to the present day. Its two main branches, known as Waidan, or External Alchemy, and Neidan, or Internal Alchemy, share in part 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, spiritual teachings on the Dao (the Absolute, and the origin of the manifested world) and, on the other, descriptions of physiological practices.

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

“elixir,” lexical analysis shows that the semantic 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. On the basis of this term, the authors of alchemical texts often call their tradition the Way of the Golden Elixir (*jindan zhi dao*).

### 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 statements 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*, or *Book of the Way and its Virtue* — concerning the relation between the Dao and the world. The cosmos as we know it is conceived of as the last stage in a series of transformations that cause a sequence of simultaneous shifts from Non-Being (*wu*) to Unity (*yi*), duality (Yin and Yang), and finally multiplicity (*wanwu*, the “ten thousand things”). The alchemist’s task is to retrace this process backwards. The practice should



Fig. 1. Chart of the Fire Times (*huohou*), showing the main sets of cosmological emblems used in alchemy and their correspondences. Yu Yan (1258–1314), *Yiwai biezhuan* (A Separate Transmission Outside the *Book of Changes*)

be performed under close supervision of a master, who provides “oral instructions” (*koujue*) 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 (meant either a spiritual condition, or sometimes in a literal sense), longevity, healing (again, both 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.

### The alchemical corpus

While historical and literary sources (including poetry) provide many relevant details, the main repository of Chinese alchemical sources is the Taoist Canon (*Daozang*), the largest collection of Taoist works. About one fifth of its 1,500 texts are closely related to the various alchemical Waidan and Neidan traditions that developed until the mid-15th century, when the present Canon was compiled and printed. Several later texts, belonging to Neidan, are found in the *Daozang jiyao* (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. The 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, and Nathan Sivin for Waidan; and Isabelle Robinet (1932–2000), Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein (1945–2009), and Catherine Despeux for Neidan.

# 1

## ORIGINS OF WAIDAN

From a historical point of view, nothing is known about the beginnings of alchemy in China. The early sources attribute their doctrines and methods to deities who first transmitted them to one another in the heavens 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 to the *fangshi* (“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 (2nd century BCE–2nd century CE) and in later times. Although historical records indicate that few *fangshi* were involved in making elixirs, one of them is associated with the first mention of alchemy in China. Around 133 BCE, Li Shaojun suggested that Emperor Wu of the Han should follow the example of the mythical Yellow Emperor (Huangdi), who had performed an alchemical method at the beginning of human time. 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

### Li Shaojun's method

[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, 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 some *fangshi* (“masters of methods”) 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.

*Shiji* (Records of the Historian), chapter 28

ceremonies to Heaven and Earth, the emperor would obtain immortality (Needham 1976:29–33; ⇒ **Pregadio 2006:28–30**).

It should be noted that, even though this account shows that alchemy existed in China by the 2nd century BCE, it does not describe an actual method for making an elixir; and — more important — that Li Shaojun's elixir was not meant to be ingested, but only to make vessels. The earliest mention of elixir ingestion is found in the *Yantie lun* (Discussions on Salt and Iron), a work dating from ca. 60 BCE (Sivin 1968:25–26; ⇒ **Pregadio 2006:30–31**) 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.

# 2

## 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 (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 (3rd–6th centuries). According to accounts found in different sources, its texts and methods were first bestowed to the Yellow Emperor by the Mysterious Woman (Xuannü), one of his teachers in the esoteric arts. Later, around the year 200, a “divine man” (*shenren*) revealed them to Zuo Ci, 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 (283–343), who summarized them in his well-known *Baopuzi* (Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature).

The three main Taiqing texts are the *Taiqing jing* (Book of the Great Clarity), the *Jiudan jing* (Book of the Nine Elixirs), and the *Jinye jing* (Book of the Golden Elixir). The versions of these works in the Taoist Canon make it possible to reconstruct several essential aspects of early Chinese alchemy (⇒ [Pregadio 2006](#)).

## Ritual

In the Taiping texts, compounding the elixir is the central part of a process involving several stages, each of which is marked by the 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*) to protect it from harmful influences, and builds at its center the Chamber of the Elixirs (*danshi*, 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.

### Taiping alchemical ritual

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 officiant*), verily and entirely devotes his thoughts to the Great Lord of the Dao (Da Daojun), Lord Lao (Laojun), and the Lord of the Great Harmony (Taihe jun). Alas, this petty man, (*name of the officiant*), covets the Medicines of Life! Lead him so that the Medicines will not volatilize and be lost, but rather be fixed by fire! Let the Medicines be good and efficacious, let the transmutations take place without hesi-



## 2: The Taiqing (Great Clarity) Tradition

tation, 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 an accomplished man (*zhiren*)! (\*)

Offer the liquor, rise, and pay obeisance two more times. Finally offer kaya nuts, mandarins and pomelos. After that, the fire may be started according to the method.

(\*) The Purple Palace is in the constellation of the Northern Dipper, at the center of the cosmos.

*Jiudan jing* (Book of the Nine Elixirs)

When the purification practices are completed, the fire may be started on a day indicated as suitable by the traditional calendric system. This stage is marked by an invocation addressed to the highest gods, namely the Great Lord of the Dao (Da Daojun) and his two attendants, Lord Lao (Laojun, the deified aspect of Laozi) and the Lord of the Great Harmony (Taihe jun). From that moment, the alchemist focuses his attention on the crucible, and compounds the elixir following the instructions found in the texts and those received from his master. When the elixir is ready, he offers different quantities of it to several deities. Finally, he pays again homage to the gods, and ingests the elixir at dawn.

### Methods and benefits

In addition to the ritual features, the Taiqing tradition is characterized by a set of fundamental methods. The main technical features may be summarized as follows. The ingredients are heated in a crucible, which is closed by another overturned crucible. Under the action of fire, the ingredients transmute themselves and release their pure essences. At the end of the required number of days, the crucible is left to cool, and

### A Taiqing alchemical method

The Fifth Divine Elixir is called Elixir in Pellet. Take one pound of mercury, and put it in a crucible [luted with the Mud] of the Six-and-One. Then take one pound of realgar, pound it until it becomes powder-like, and cover the mercury with it. Then take one pound of hematite, pound it until it becomes powder-like, and cover the realgar with it. Close the crucible with another crucible of the Six-and-One, seal the joints luting them with the Mud of the Six-and-One, and let it dry.

Place the crucible over a fire of horse manure or chaff for nine days and nine nights. Extinguish the fire, and place the crucible over a fire of charcoal for nine days and nine nights. Extinguish the fire, let the crucible cool for one day and open it. The Medicine will have entirely sublimated, and will adhere to the upper crucible.

*Jiudan jing* (Book of the Nine Elixirs)

is opened. The elixir has coagulated under the upper part of the vessel; it is carefully collected, and other substances are added to it. In certain cases it is placed again in the crucible and newly heated; otherwise it is stored to be ingested at a later time.

The most frequently used ingredients in the Taiqing texts are mercury, realgar, orpiment, malachite, magnetite, and arsenolite. The main role in the alchemical process, however, is played by the crucible itself. To reproduce the inchoate state (*hundun*) of the cosmos at its inception, the vessel should be hermetically sealed so that Breath (*qi*) is not dispersed. For this purpose, a mud made of seven ingredients is spread on its outer and inner surfaces and at the point of conjunction of its two halves. This compound is known as Mud of the Six-and-One (*liuyi ni*) or — to underline its importance in the alchemical practice — Divine Mud (*shenni*). In several methods, a lead-mercury compound, representing the conjunc-

## 2: The Taiqing (Great Clarity) Tradition

tion of Heaven and Earth, or Yin and Yang, is also spread on the vessel or is placed within it with the other ingredients.

In the crucible, the ingredients “revert” (*huan*) to their original state (hence the name Reverted Elixir, mentioned above). A 7th-century commentary to one of the Taiqing texts equates this refined matter with the “essence” (*jing*) that, as the *Daode jing* (sec. 21) states, is hidden within the womb of the Dao and gives birth to the world: “Indistinct! Vague! But within it there is something. Dark! Obscure! But within it there is an essence.” In this view, the elixir is a tangible sign of the seed that generates the cosmos and enables the self-manifestation of the Dao. This *prima materia* can be transmuted into alchemical gold.

Ingesting the elixir is said to confer transcendence, immortality, and admission into the ranks of the celestial bureaucracy. Additionally, the elixir grants healing from illnesses and protection from

### Benefits of the elixirs

Practising breathing and *daoyin*, exhaling the old and inhaling the new breath, and ingesting medicines of herbs and plants can extend the length of one’s life, but does not allow one to escape death. When a man ingests the Divine Elixirs, he becomes a divine immortal and transcends the generations [of mortals]. . . .

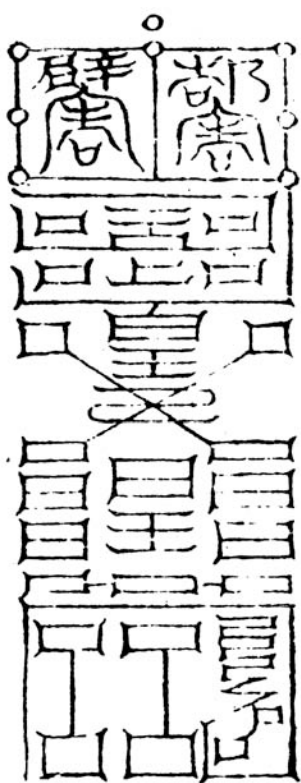
The ten thousand gods will become your attendants and offer protection, and the Jade Women will be at your service. The divine immortals will welcome you, and you will rise to heaven. The hundred demons, the Gods of Soil and Grain, the Count of the Wind, and the Master of Rain will welcome you, and you will have them at your service. . . .

The Jade Women will become your attendants. The Director of Destinies will delete your name from the records of the dead and enter it in the registers of immortality.

*Jiudan jing* (Book of the Nine Elixirs)

demons, spirits, and several other disturbances including weapons, wild animals, and even thieves. To provide these supplementary benefits, the elixir does not need to be ingested and may simply be kept in one's hand or carried at one's belt as a powerful apotropaic talisman.

### Taiqing alchemy and the later Waidan tradition



“Talisman for Warding Off Harm”, to be burnt in the alchemical furnace

Commentary to the *Jiudan jing* (Book of the Nine Elixirs), chapter 19

The Taiqing tradition shows that Chinese alchemy is, at the beginning, a ritual practice performed to communicate with benevolent divinities and to expel dangerous spirits. The emphasis on ritual is closely related to another major feature: no Taiqing text describes the alchemical process using the emblems, images, and language of Chinese cosmology and its system of correspondences. A few methods reproduce basic cosmological models such as Yin-Yang and the five agents (*wuxing*), but most of them involve the use of a large number of ingredients, with no definite relation to cosmological principles. Moreover, the Taiqing texts do not mention the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*) and the analogous emblems that, in the later tradition, play a crucial role in framing the alchemical discourse and practice.

### 3

## TAOIST MEDITATION AND THE ORIGINS OF NEIDAN

To follow a historical sequence, we shall now take a step aside and look briefly at the early Taoist traditions based on meditation on the inner gods. Although teachings and practices of these traditions differ remarkably from those that we have just surveyed, they developed in the same region and at the same time as Taiping alchemy. They do not constitute alchemy in the proper sense of the word, but are essential to understand the origins of Neidan from both a doctrinal and a historical point of view. (This section is concerned only with the main analogies between meditation and Neidan; for a comprehensive description of early Taoist meditation, see Robinet 1993).

### The inner gods and their nourishment

The main texts that document the early Taoist meditation practices are the ⇒ *Laozi zhongjing* (Central Book of Laozi) and the *Huangting jing* (Book of the Yellow Court). Their origins are unclear, but both were transmitted by Taoist lineages in Jiangnan by the 3rd century.

Both texts describe the human being as host to a veritable pantheon of gods, the most important of which represent the formless Dao or cosmological principles such as Yin and Yang or the five agents. In addition, the inner gods perform multiple roles: they allow the human be-

### The Red Child

... He resides precisely in the ducts of the stomach, the Great Granary. He sits facing due south on a couch of jade and pearls, and a flowery canopy of yellow clouds covers him. He is clothed in garments with pearls of five hues. His mother resides above on his right, embracing and nourishing him; his father resides above on its left, instructing and defending him. ...

Therefore constantly think of the True Man Child-Cinnabar (Zidan) residing in the Palace of the stomach, the Great Granary. He sits facing due south, feeding on the Yellow Essence and the Red Breath, drinking and ingesting the Fount of Nectar (= saliva). Child-Cinnabar, Original Yang, is nine tenths of an inch tall, but think of him as equal to your body.

*Laozi zhongjing* (Central Book of Laozi), sec. 12

ing to communicate with the corresponding gods of the celestial pantheon, serve as administrators of the human body, and preside over the balance of its functions.

The innermost deity is the Red Child (Chizi), who is also called Zidan (Child-Cinnabar). He resides in the stomach — one of the multiple centers of the body — and, like the Supreme Great One (Shangshang Taiyi, the highest god), he is a transformation of the Breath of the Dao. The Red Child is said to represent one's own "true self" (*zhenwu*). In this function, he is a precursor of the "embryo" and the "infant" that Neidan adepts, centuries later, would generate and nourish by means of their practices.

To ensure that this and the other gods stay in their residences — their departure would provoke death — one should nourish them and their dwellings. In particular,

adepts are instructed to visualize and circulate a "yellow essence" (*huangjing*) and a "red breath" (*chiqi*) within their bodies, respectively associated with the Moon (Yin) and the Sun (Yang), and to deliver them

### 3: Taoist Meditation and the Origins of Neidan

#### Yellow Essence and Red Breath

Constantly think that below the nipples are the Sun and the Moon. Within the Sun and the Moon are a Yellow Essence and a Red Breath that enter the Crimson Palace (= the heart); then again they enter the Yellow Court (= the spleen) and the Purple Chamber (= the gallbladder). The Yellow Essence and the Red Breath thoroughly fill the Great Granary (= the stomach). The Red Child is within the ducts of the stomach. He sits facing due south, drinking and eating the Yellow Essence and the Red Breath until he is sated.

*Laozi zhongjing* (Central Book of Laozi). sec. 11

to the gods. There are clear analogies between these essences and breaths and the Yin and Yang essences and breaths whereby a Neidan adept would conceive and feed his inner “embryo.”

An additional source of nourishment of the gods is the practitioner’s own salivary juices. These juices have the function of “irrigating” (*guan*) the inner organs in which the gods reside. The terms used to denote the salivary juices have clear alchemical connotations; they include Jade Liquor (*yuye*), Golden Nectar (*jinli*), and even Golden Liquor (*jinye*, the name of one of the Taiqing elixirs).

Finally, one method in the *Laozi zhongjing* consists in causing the breaths of the heart and the kidneys to descend and rise within one’s body, respectively, so that they may join and become one. An analogous practice would be performed by Neidan adepts when they join the Fire of the heart and the Water of the kidneys (Despeux 1994:152–58).

### The embryo in Shangqing Taoism

The “interiorization” of Waidan is even clearer in the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) tradition of Taoism, which originated in the second half of the 4th century.(\*). Shangqing inherited the traditions summarized above and recodified them in two ways. First, it incorporated certain Waidan practices, but used them especially as a support for meditation (Bokenkamp 1997:275–372; ⇒Pregadio 2006:57-59). Second, and more important for our present subject, the Shangqing scriptures contain methods for the creation of an immortal body, or an immortal self, by means of a return to a self-generated inner embryo (Robinet 1993:139–43). One example is the practice of “untying the knots” (*jiejie*), whereby an adept re-experiences his embryonic development in meditation. From month to month, beginning on the anniversary of his conception, he receives again the “breaths of the Nine Heavens” — called the Nine Elixirs (*jiudan*) — and each time one of his inner organs is turned into gold or jade. Then his Original Father and Mother issue breaths that join at the center of his person, and generate an immortal infant.

### Meditation and alchemy

The examples seen above show that certain fundamental ideas, images, and practices that characterize Neidan existed centuries before the beginning of its documented history. Most important among them

(\*) Shangqing is one of two traditions that emerged from revelations that occurred in Jiangnan in the second half of the 4th century. Its methods are based on meditation. The other tradition is Lingbao (Sacred Treasure), which is mostly concerned with communal ritual.



### 3: Taoist Meditation and the Origins of Neidan

is certainly the image of the infant as a representation of the “true self” (fig. 2). Two essential features of Neidan, however, are not present in the Shangqing and the earlier meditation practices: the idea of the Internal Elixir, and the use of a cosmology that, on the one hand, explains the generative process of the cosmos from the Dao, and, on the other, serves to frame a practice that reproduces that process in a reverse sequence.

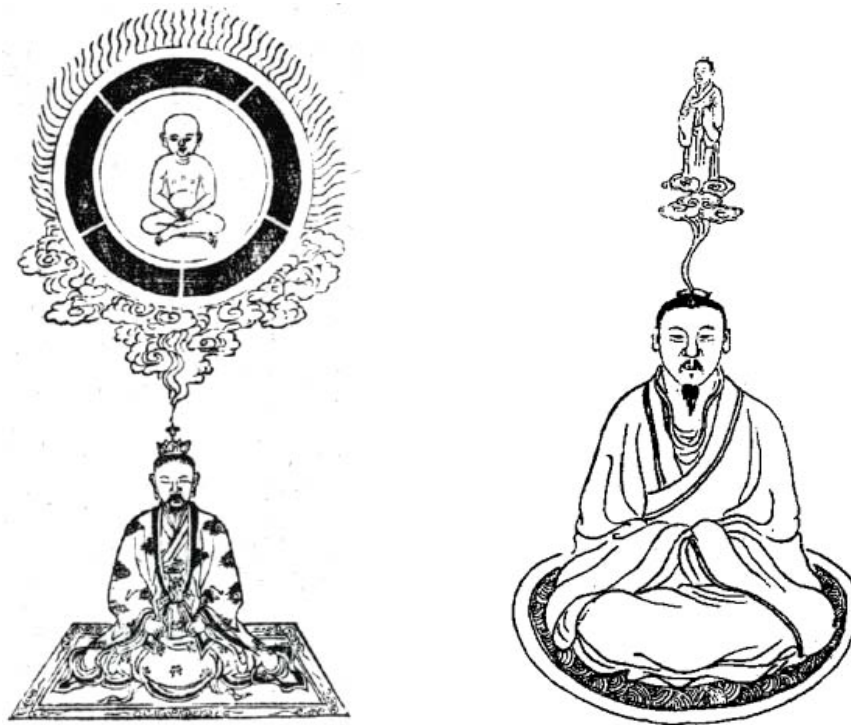


Fig. 2. Continuity between Taoist meditation and Internal Alchemy. Left: *Dadong zhenjing* (True Scripture of the Great Cavern), a Shangqing meditation text originally dating from ca. 370 CE. Right: *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Joint Cultivation of Nature and Life), a Neidan text dating from ca. 1600.

## 4

# THE *CANTONG QI* (SEAL OF THE UNITY OF THE THREE)

The foundations for both features mentioned above were provided by the *Cantong qi*, or *Seal of the Unity of the Three*, the main text in the history of Chinese alchemy (⇒Pregadio 2011). Under an allusive language teeming with images and symbols, this work, almost entirely written in poetry, hides the exposition of a doctrine that has inspired a large number of commentaries and other works. At least thirty-eight commentaries written from ca. 700 to the end of the 19th century are extant, and scores of Waidan and Neidan texts in the Taoist Canon and elsewhere are related to it (⇒Pregadio 2012).

### Two main readings

The *Cantong qi* is traditionally attributed to Wei Boyang (fig. 3), an alchemist who is said to come, once again, from the Jiangnan region, and to have lived around the mid-2nd century. This attribution became current at the end of the first millennium and was upheld by the Neidan lineages, which have shaped the dominant understanding of the *Cantong qi* in China.

Neidan formulated the first of two main readings of the *Cantong qi*. Along its history, it has offered explications of the text that differ in many details, but have one point in common: the *Cantong qi* is at the

#### 4: The *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three)

origins of Internal Alchemy and contains a complete illustration of its principles and methods. In this reading, the *Cantong qi* is not only an alchemical text, but the first Neidan text. This understanding has played a deep influence the development of Chinese alchemy, and is crucial in order to comprehend the Neidan doctrines and history. It raises, however, two major issues: the *Cantong qi*, supposedly written in the 2nd century, does not play any visible influence on extant Waidan texts until the 7th century, and more importantly, no alchemical or other source suggests that Neidan existed before the 8th century.

In addition to this one, there has been within the Taoist tradition a second, less well-known way of reading the *Cantong qi*. This reading takes account of a point that is reflected in the title of the text and is stated in its verses (sec. 84 and 87): the *Cantong qi* is concerned not with one, but with three major subjects, and joins them into a single doctrine. The three subjects are cosmology, Taoism, and alchemy. This reading releases the text from an exclusive relation to alchemy. When the origins of the three main doctrinal and textual components are examined separately from one another, it becomes clear that the *Cantong qi* could not reach a form substantially similar to the present

##### The three subjects of the *Cantong qi*

The qualities and nature of the great *Book of Changes* all follow their measures; with study, the Yellow Emperor's and the Old Master's teachings are simple to grasp; and the work with the fire of the furnace is based on the Truth. These three Ways stem from one, and together yield one path.

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.

*Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), sec. 84 and 87



Fig. 3. Wei Boyang and a disciple compounding the Elixir

one before ca. 450, and possibly one or even two centuries later (⇒ [Pregadio 2011:5-27](#)). Seen in this light, the *Cantong qi* is not the first Neidan text, but the first text of Neidan.

In each of the three subjects, the *Cantong qi* presents fundamental differences compared to the earlier traditions: it describes the features of the cosmos and its relation to the Dao by means of the standard Chinese cosmological system;(\*) it distinguishes two ways of realization, and defines the scope and function of alchemy with regard to them; and it presents an alchemical model that differs substantially from the

model of the earlier Waidan texts. The views of the *Cantong qi* on these three subjects are at the center of the later cosmological traditions of Waidan and of virtually the whole of Neidan.

(\*) This system, often called “correlative cosmology” by Western scholars, aims to explicate the nature and properties of different domains—primarily the cosmos and the human being—and the correlations that occur among them. It does so by using several sets of emblems, such as Yin and Yang, the five agents, and the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*. While the individual components have earlier origins, they were integrated into a comprehensive, consistent system between the 3rd and the 2nd centuries BCE.

## 4: The *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three)

### Dao and cosmos

The *Cantong qi* describes the relation of the cosmos to the Dao by means of sets of emblems that represent the different states of the cosmos (unity, duality, multiplicity). Two of these sets are especially important.

The first set is formed by four of the ⇒ **eight trigrams** of the *Book of Changes*, namely Qian ☰, Kun ☷, Kan ☵, and Li ☲. Qian and Kun represent the primary modes taken on by the Dao in its self-manifestation: Qian stands for its active (Yang, “creative”) aspect, and Kun stands for its passive (Yin, “receptive”) aspect. The permanent conjunction of Qian and Kun in the precosmic domain gives birth to the cosmos. In that everlasting instant, the Yang of Qian ☰ moves into Kun ☷, which becomes Kan ☵, and in response, the Yin of Kun ☷ moves into Qian ☰, which becomes Li ☲. Kan and Li therefore replace Qian and Kun in the cosmos, but harbor them as their own inner essences. While

#### 📖 Qian, Kun, Kan, Li

Qian ☰ the firm and Kun ☷ the yielding join and embrace one another; Yang endows, Yin receives, the masculine and the feminine attend one to the other. Attending, they create and transform, unfolding their Essence and Breath.

Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are at the fore: their radiance and glow come down and spread out. Mysterious and obscure, this can hardly be fathomed and cannot be pictured or charted. The sages gauged its depth; one with it, they set forth its foundation.

These four, in indistinction, are right within Empty Non-Being. Sixty hexagrams revolve around them, outspread like a chariot. Harnessing a dragon and a mare, the bright noble man holds the reins of time.

In harmony there are following and compliance: the path is level and begets no evil. Evil ways obstruct and hamper: they endanger the kingdom.

*Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), sec. 43

the main images of Qian and Kun are Heaven and Earth, which never exchange their positions, the main images of Kan and Li are the Moon and the Sun, which alternate in their growth and decline in the compass of space and the cycles of time. Both space and time, therefore, are the operation of the One Breath (*yiqi*) of the Dao in the cosmos.

The second main set of emblems is the ⇒ **five agents** (*wuxing*), namely Wood, Fire, Soil, Metal, and Water. The five agents are generated by the division of Unity into Yin and Yang, and by the further subdivision of Yin and Yang into four states. Water and Fire are the Yin and Yang of the postcelestial state, and Wood and Metal are the True Yin and True Yang of the precelestial state. Soil, the fifth agent, has

both a Yang and a Yin aspect. Being at the center of the other agents, it stands for the source from which they derive. Partaking of all of them, it guarantees the conjunction of the world of multiplicity to the original state of Unity.

### **Superior virtue and Inferior virtue**

Superior virtue has no doing: there is nothing whereby it does. Inferior virtue does: there is something whereby it does.

*Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), sec. 38

“Superior virtue has no doing”: it does not use examining and seeking. “Inferior virtue does”: its operation does not rest.

*Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), sec. 20

### **The way of “non-doing” and the purport of alchemy**

The principles expressed in the *Daode jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, the second major early Taoist work, inspire the Taoist sections of the *Cantong qi*, where both texts are repeatedly quoted. The foremost

## 4: The *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three)

of these principles is “non-doing” (*wuwei*), a term that defines the operation of the Taoist saint in the world.

Drawing from a passage of the *Daode jing* (sec. 20) that makes a distinction between the ways of “superior virtue” (*shangde*), or spontaneous non-doing (*wuwei*), and “inferior virtue” (*xiade*), or intentional doing (*youwei*), the *Cantong qi* (sec. 18-25) defines the scope and purport of alchemy. In the way of superior virtue, the state prior to the separation of the One into the Two and into multiplicity is spontaneously attained, and the fundamental Unity of the precelestial and the postcelestial domains is immediately comprehended. This is the way of the realized person, or the True Man (*zhenren*). Inferior virtue, instead, focuses on the search of the authentic principle hidden within multiplicity and change; this search needs supports and requires a practice. Alchemy, according to the *Cantong qi*, is the way of inferior virtue: the alchemi-

### The True Man in the *Cantong qi*

Innerly nourish yourself, serene and quiescent in Empty Non-Being. Going back to the fundament conceal your light, and innerly illuminate your body.

Shut the openings and raise and strengthen the Numinous Trunk; as the three luminaries sink into the ground, warmly nourish the Pearl.

Ears, eyes, and mouth are the three treasures: shut them, and let nothing pass through. The True Man withdraws in the depths of the abyss; drifting and roaming, he keeps to the compass.

When the three have been latched, repose your body in an empty room, and give your will to returning to Empty Non-Being; without thoughts you attain constancy.

Going back and forth brings obstruction: if focused, your Heart will not wander or stray. In sleep, embrace your Spirit; when awake, watch over existence and extinction.

*Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), sec. 18, 58, 59



cal process, either “external” or “internal”, is a form of “doing” and is framed as a gradual process. Its purpose is to prepare one to enter the state of “non doing,” and is fulfilled only when this happens.

### The alchemical model

The basic principles of the practice according to the *Cantong qi* proceed directly from its views on the relation between the Dao and the “ten thousand things” (*wanwu*). As in the whole of Taoism, this relation is explained by means of a sequence of stages that occur simultaneously: the Absolute establishes itself as Unity, which divides itself into the active and the passive principles — namely, True Yang (Qian) and True Yin (Kun). The re-conjunction of these principles gives birth to all entities and phenomena in the world.

In the cosmos, as we have seen, True Yang is concealed within Yin, and True Yin is concealed within Yang; each Yang entity therefore

#### The alchemical method of the *Cantong qi*

Make dikes and embankments with Metal, so that Water may enter and effortlessly drift. Fifteen is the measure of Metal, the same is the number of Water.

Tend to the furnace to determine the scruples and ounces: five parts of Water are more than enough. In this way the two become True, and Metal will weigh as at first. The other three are thus not used, but Fire, which is 2, is fastened to them.

The three things join one another: in their transformations their shapes are divine. The Breath of Great Yang (= Fire) lies underneath, within an instant it steams and subdues. First it liquefies, then coagulates; it is given the name Yellow Carriage.

When its time is about to come to an end, it wrecks its own nature and disrupts its life span. Its form looks like ashes or soil, its shape is like dust on a luminous window.



#### 4: The *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three)

Pound it and mix it, and let it enter the Red-colored Gates. Seal the joints firmly, striving to make them as tight as you can.

A blazing fire grows below: by day and by night its sound is unchanging and steady. At first make it gentle so that it may be adjusted, at the end make it fierce and let it spread out.

Watch over it with heed and caution: inspect it attentively and regulate the amount of its warmth. It will rotate through twelve nodes, and when the nodes are complete, it will again need your care.

Now its Breath is worn out, and its life is about to be severed; it pauses and dies, losing its *po* and its *hun*. Then its color changes to purple: the Reverted Elixir, radiant and glowing, is attained.

Minutely powder it and make it into a pellet — even one knife-point is supremely divine.

*Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), sec. 39-40

harbors True Yin, and vice versa. First and foremost among these entities is the cosmos itself: from its perspective, dominated by duality, the world is Yin in relation to the Dao, but conceals its One Breath, which is True Yang. Accordingly, the alchemical process consists in tracing the stages of the generative process of the cosmos in a reverse gradual sequence, in order to recover the One Breath.

On the basis of these principles, the only form of alchemical practice sanctioned by the *Cantong qi* is one that enables the conjunction of Qian and Kun, or True Yang and True Yin. According to the *Cantong qi*, True Lead (☰) and True Mercury (☷) are “of the same kind” (*tonglei*) as Qian and Kun. The Yin and Yang entities that respectively contain these authentic principles are “black lead” (i.e., native lead ☷) and cinnabar (☰). In the strict sense of the term, alchemy consists in extracting True Lead from “black lead” and True Mercury from cinnabar, and in joining them to one another.

## 5

### WAIDAN AFTER THE *CANTONG QI*

The majority of datable texts of External Alchemy were written during the Tang period (7th–9th centuries), which has been called the “golden age” of Waidan. The main trends of this period attest to the decline of the Taiqing tradition, paralleled by the growing importance acquired by doctrines and methods related to the *Cantong qi*. The Tang period is also known for the interest that Waidan exerted among literati. Two of the greatest Chinese poets, Li Bai (701–62) and Bai Juyi (772–46), were attracted by the *Cantong qi*. Other poets, including Meng Haoran (689–740), Liu Yuxi (772–843), and Liu Zongyuan (773–819), also refer to the elixirs in their works. This interest continued in later times when the focus of interest shifted to Neidan, many of whose sources are written in poetry (Ho Peng Yoke 1985:195–203).

Although the *Cantong qi* changed forever the history of Taoist alchemy, by no means all Waidan works written during the Tang period are inspired by its doctrines. One of the best-known among them is the *Taiqing danjing yaojue* (Essential Instructions from the Books of the Elixirs of the Great Clarity), a compendium compiled by the eminent physician Sun Simo (traditional dates 581–682). His work (masterfully translated in Sivin 1968) contains about three dozen Waidan methods. All of them certainly derive from earlier texts, and none is related to the *Cantong qi*.

### Two emblematic methods

Among a large variety of methods documented by this and other sources, two became representative of Waidan during the Tang period. The first, of which several variants exist, is based on cinnabar (Yang). The mercury contained in cinnabar (Yin within Yang) is extracted and is added to sulphur (Yang) to form cinnabar again. This process, typically repeated seven or nine times, yields a substance that is deemed to be progressively more Yang in nature (7 and 9 are Yang numbers). The final result is an elixir that is entirely devoid of Yin components and embodies the luminous qualities of Pure Yang (*chunyang*), that is, the state of Unity before the separation of the One into the two.

A noteworthy example of this method is provided by Chen Shaowei, who was active in the early 8th century. After an elaborate account of the formation, varieties, and symbolism of cinnabar

#### Furnace and reaction vessel

The furnace and reaction-vessel for the Great Elixir must be made in such a way as to incorporate Heaven, Earth, and Man (the Three Powers), and the Five Spirits (*wushen* = the Five Agents). The vessel must be made from 24 ounces of gold from the seventh recycling, in order to respond to the 24 *qi* periods. . . . The 8 ounces of the lid respond to the Eight Nodes (the beginnings and mid-points of the four seasons). . . . The vessel must be emplaced according to the Eight Trigrams and the Twelve Spirits (*shi'er shen*, = the 12 hours) before the mixed Purple Gold Granules are placed in it

Chen Shaowei, *Dadong lian zhenbao jing jiu huan jindan miao jue* (Wonderous Instructions on the Golden Elixir of the Nine Reversions, Supplementary to the Scripture of the Great Cavern on Refining the Real Treasure); trl. Sivin, “The Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy,” 279-81, with minor changes

bar, his work describes an alchemical process divided into two main parts (Sivin 1980:237–40 and 270–74). In the first part, cinnabar is refined in seven cycles, each of which yields a “gold” that can be either ingested or used as an ingredient in the next cycle. In the second part, the final product of the seventh cycle of refinement is used as the main ingredient of a Reverted Elixir that undergoes a complex heating procedure. Chen Shaowei uses cosmological symbolism, but his work is not influenced by the *Cantong qi*.

The second main method, directly derived from the doctrines of the *Cantong qi*, takes account not only of Yin and Yang in the world that we know, but especially of their precosmic, “true” natures. Here the initial ingredients are native cinnabar (Yang ☲) and native lead (Yin ☱). They are separately refined, so that cinnabar produces True Mercury (*zhenhong*), which is True Yin (☵), and lead produces True Lead (*zhenqian*), which is True Yang (☲). When the two refined substances are conjoined, one obtains an elixir that, again, incorporates the qualities of Pure Yang.

### Alchemy and time cycles

Other facets of the Waidan traditions inspired by the *Cantong qi* show that, during the Tang period, the alchemical methods were devised to mirror features of cosmological system. Several Tang alchemists maintain, like their companions in other parts of the world, that their work reproduces the process by which nature transmutes minerals and metals into gold within the earth’s womb. In their view, the elixir prepared in the alchemical laboratory has the same properties of the Naturally Reverted Elixir (*ziran huandan*), which nature refines in a cosmic cycle of 4320 years. This number corresponds to the total sum of the 12

“double hours” (*shì*) in the 360 days that form one year according to the lunar calendar. Through the alchemical work, a process that requires an entire cosmic cycle to occur can be reproduced in a relatively short time (Sivin 1980: 245–48).

An analogous intent inspires the method for heating the elixir, known as Fire Times (*huohou*; Sivin 1980:266–79). Here the twelve “sovereign hexagrams” (*bigua*) of the *Book of Changes* are used to represent a complete time cycle, from the rise of the Yang principle to its highest point of development, followed by its decline and the reversion to pure Yin (Fig. 4). The twelve-stage process — which, as we shall see, was also adopted in Neidan — replicates the cyclical aspect of time: the twelve hexagrams match the twelve “double hours” of the day and the twelve months of the year. The textual model of this process is the description of the cycle of the Sun during the year found in the *Cantong qi* (sec. 51).

### The Naturally Reverted Elixir

Natural cyclically-transformed elixir (*ziran huandan*) is formed when flowing mercury (*liuhong*), embracing Sir Metal (*jingong* = lead), becomes pregnant. Wherever there is cinnabar there are also lead and silver. In 4320 years the elixir is finished. Realgar to its left, orpiment to its right, cinnabar above it, malachite below. It embraces the pneuma of sun and moon, Yin and Yang, for 4320 years; thus, upon repletion of its own pneuma, it becomes a cyclically-transformed elixir for immortals of the highest grade and celestial beings.

Anon., *Danlun jue zhixin jian* (Instructions on the Treatises on the Elixir, a Mirror Pointing to the Heart); trl. Sivin, “The Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy,” 232, with minor changes



Fig. 4. The twelve “sovereign hexagrams” (*bigua*).

### The decline of Waidan

Imperial patronage of alchemical practices, the earliest example of which was seen with Li Shaojun, continued in the following centuries (Needham 1976:117–19, 131–32) and intensified in the Tang period. The fascination for alchemy, understood mainly or exclusively as a means of “prolonging life,” resulted in the deaths of at least two and possibly as many as four Tang emperors due to elixir poisoning. Analogous cases are also documented in other milieux.

These events have received due attention in earlier studies on the history of Chinese alchemy, which have described the shift from Waidan to Neidan as caused by the increase in cases of elixir poisoning. Leaving aside the fact that, according to this view, Chinese alchemists needed several centuries to realize that many of their ingredients were deadly, there are clear indications that the transition from Waidan to Neidan was a much more complex and wide-ranging phenomenon. I will attempt to outline below some of its main aspects.

The analogies between the two paradigmatic methods outlined above should not conceal a key event in the development of alchemy in China: from the Tang period onwards, lead and mercury became the main substances in Waidan, both as elixir ingredients and as emblems of cosmological principles. This allowed the whole repertoire of Chinese

cosmology to enter for the first time the language of alchemy. Parallel to this, the ritual features of the Waidan process that were typical of the Taiping tradition were either reduced or disregarded. Alchemy thus developed a figurative language suitable to represent doctrinal principles, and capable for this reason of lending itself to describe multiple forms of practice, providing that they are inspired by those principles.

These shifts were crucial in the history of Chinese alchemy. The Waidan alchemists began to use a symbolic system that affords a way to describe a metaphysics (the non-duality of Dao and cosmos), a cosmogony (the birth of the cosmos from the Dao), and a cosmology (the functioning of the cosmos seen as the operation of the Absolute in the relative) by means of Yin and Yang, the five agents, the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*, and other sets of emblems. Correlating the Waidan process to this system was impossible for methods based on cinnabar and mercury (let alone for those based on other ingredients). The shift of focus from ritual to cosmology, moreover, paved the way for the development of Neidan: elements drawn from the early Taoist meditation methods were incorporated into new practices for compounding the Internal Elixir, even though, as we shall see, this resulted in the disappearance of the inner gods themselves.

In agreement with these trends, most Waidan sources from the Song period (mid-10th to mid-13th centuries) onward consist of anthologies from earlier works (Needham 1976:196–208) or deal with metallurgical methods. Waidan texts continued to be written and elixirs continued to be compounded, but after the Tang period virtually the whole soteriological import of alchemy was transferred to Neidan. The “last significant Chinese alchemical writing”, to use Ho Peng Yoke’s words, was written in the early 15th century by the Ming-dynasty prince Zhu Quan (1378–1448; Ho Peng Yoke 2007:78–88).

## 6

# MAIN NEIDAN LINEAGES AND MASTERS

The earliest traces of Neidan in the extant literature are visible in the works by Tao Zhi, who lived in the second half of the 8th century. Accounts concerning previous historical or semi-legendary figures, including Su Yuanlang (late 6th century?), Deng Yuzhi (ca. 600?), and the Buddhist master Huisi (517–77), are found in sources significantly later than the events they purport to record. It is worthy of note, though, that since Deng Yuzhi and Huisi lived on Hengshan (Mount Heng, in present-day Hunan), this mountain may have been one of the centers that evolved traditions leading to the birth of Neidan.

### Zhong-Lü

The first clearly identifiable tradition of Internal Alchemy developed in the 9th/10th centuries.(\*). Named Zhong-Lü after Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin, two illustrious Taoist Immortals who are associated with multiple Neidan lineages, this tradition is characterized by a focus on physiological practices, closely correlated to cosmological principles. Among its texts is the *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* (Records of the Transmis-

(\*) The Zhenyuan (True Origin) corpus, containing Neidan and other materials, may be partly based on texts of approximately the same period, but their received versions seem to date from the Song period.



sion of the Dao from Zhongli Quan to Lü Dongbin), the first important doctrinal treatise of Neidan (Wong 2000). Its practices are detailed in the *Lingbao bifa* (Complete Methods of the Sacred Treasure; Baldrian-Hussein 1984).

### Nanzong (Southern Lineage)

The main text in Neidan after the *Cantong qi* is the *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality), a work entirely written in poetry by Zhang Boduan (987?–1082) around 1075 (Robinet 1995:205–54; Crowe 2000; ⇨ Pregadio 2009). In the 13th century, Zhang Boduan was placed at the origin of Nanzong, the Southern Lineage of Neidan, and the *Wuzhen pian* became the main textual source of that lineage. After Zhang Boduan, the lineage continues with Shi Tai (?–1158), Xue Daoguang (1078?–1191), Chen Nan (?–1213), and finally Bai Yuchan (1194–1229?), who is one of the greatest figures in the history of Neidan and is also known as a specialist of the

#### Zhong-Lü

At the *zi* hour, Breath (*qi*) is born within the kidneys, and at the *mao* hour, it reaches the liver. The liver is Yang and its Breath is flourishing. [Therefore] the Yang ascends and enters the “position of Yang”: this matches the Spring equinox. At the *wu* hour, Breath reaches the heart. The accumulated Breath generates the Liquor (*ye*), just like, at the Summer solstice, the Yang ascends reaching Heaven and the Yin is born.

At the *wu* hour, the Liquor (*ye*) is born within the heart, and at the *you* hour, it reaches the lungs. The lungs are Yin and their Liquor is abundant. [Therefore] the Yin descends and enters the “position of Yin”: this matches the Autumn equinox. At the *zi* hour, the Liquor reaches the kidneys. The accumulated Liquor generates Breath (*qi*), just like, at the Winter solstice, the Yin descends reaching the Earth and the Yang is born.

*Lingbao bifa* (Complete Methods of the Sacred Treasure)

### **Nanzong (Southern Lineage)**

Rely in the first place on *wu* and *ji*  
that act as go-betweeners,  
then let husband and wife  
join together and rejoice.  
Just wait until your work is achieved  
to have audience at the Northern  
Portal,  
and in the radiance of a ninefold mist  
you will ride a soaring phoenix.

All people on their own have  
the Medicine of long life;  
it is only for insanity and delusion  
that they cast it away to no avail.  
When the Sweet Dew descends,  
Heaven and Earth join one another;  
where the Yellow Sprout grows,  
Kan ☵ and Li ☲ conjoin.

Three, Five, One —  
all is in these three words;  
but truly rare are those who un-  
derstand them  
in past and present times.  
East is 3, South is 2,  
together they make 5;  
North is 1, West is 4,  
they are the same.

**Wuzhen pian** (Awakening to Real-  
ity), poems 3, 6 and 14

Taoist Thunder Rites (*leifa*). While transmission among the latter four masters is historical, Shi Tai was not Zhang Boduan's direct disciple. It is now understood that the Southern Lineage had, at the beginning, no conventionally recognized form or structure, and was formally established as a lineage only at a later time, possibly by Bai Yuchan himself.

### **Beizong (Northern Lineage)**

The Northern Lineage (Beizong) is equivalent to the earlier stages of the Quanzhen (Complete Reality) school of Taoism, which was founded by Wang Chongyang (1113–70). While Quanzhen allows for different forms of individual practice — especially meditation — and also includes forms of Taoist communal ritual, its methods incorporate a brand of Neidan that emphasizes the cultivation of one's inner nature. Both Wang Chongyang and several of his disciples, e.g. Liu Chuxuan (1147–1203) and Hao Datong (1140–

1213), are ascribed with Neidan works. The main member of the group in view of the later history of Neidan is Qiu Chuji (also known as Qiu Changchun, 1148–1227).

### Two Yuan-dynasty masters

In the Yuan period (mid-13th to mid-14th centuries), two authors of Neidan texts deserve mention. Li Daochun (fl. 1290) is the author of the *Zhonghe ji* (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology) and several other works, some of which were actually compiled by his disciples. Among the main subjects treated in these works are the principles at the basis of the three-stage Neidan practice, the concepts of *Xing* and *Ming* (inner nature and worldly existence, to be discussed below), the grading of Neidan and other methods, and Neidan terminology. Chen Zhixu (1290–ca. 1368) knew the *Zhonghe ji* and quotes from it. He is the author of a commentary to the *Cantong qi* that contains one of best redactions of the text,

#### Li Daochun

By keeping the Essence complete, you can protect the body (*shen*). To keep the Essence complete, first the body must be secure and settled. When it is secure and settled, there are no desires, and thus the Essence is complete.

By keeping the Breath complete, you can nourish the mind (*xin*). To keep the Breath complete, first the mind must be clear and quiescent. When it is clear and quiescent, there are no thoughts, and thus the Breath is complete.

By keeping the Spirit complete, you can return to Emptiness. To keep the Spirit complete, first the Intention must be sincere. When the Intention is sincere, body and mind join one another, and you return to Emptiness.

Therefore Essence, Breath, and Spirit are the three primary ingredients; and body, mind, and Intention are the three primary essentials.

*Zhonghe ji* (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology)

### Chen Zhixu

This Metal is the Ancestral Breath prior to Heaven, but is generated in the state posterior to Heaven. Those who practice the great cultivation intend to search for the body of the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) before its division, the true instant of the creation of the world. Therefore the exalted immortals and the highest saints search for the Breath prior to the generation of Heaven and Earth within the state posterior to Heaven and Earth, after the rise of form and matter. With this Breath they refine and achieve Pure Yang. This is why we call it Elixir. . . .

You should search for the state prior to Heaven, before the rise of forms; in the state posterior to Heaven and Earth, after the rise of forms, there are human beings and things, and not the Golden Elixir.

*Jindan dayao* (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir)

and is also known for a major compendium entitled *Jindan dayao* (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir). His form of Neidan includes sexual practices, and in later times he was retrospectively associated with the Yin-Yang Branch (*yinyang pai*) of Neidan, which includes intercourse between man and woman among its methods. The other branch, called Pure Cultivation (*qingxiu pai*), is based instead on meditational and physiological practices without resort to sexual conjunction.

### Wu-Liu branch

During the Ming and the Qing periods (mid-14th to mid-17th centuries, and mid-17th to early 20th centuries, respectively), several Neidan masters declare their affiliation with the Longmen (Dragon Gate) lineage of Taoism (both before and after its official establishment by Wang Changyue, ?–1680), or with one or another of its numerous branches. This phenomenon has two main reasons:

## 6: Main Neidan Lineages and Masters

first, Longmen claimed descent from the above-named Qiu Chuji, one of the main early Quanzhen masters; second, Longmen became, during the Qing dynasty, the orthodox Quanzhen lineage and the officially sanctioned form of Taoism (Esposito 2001).

Among the Ming-dynasty representatives of Neidan affiliated with Longmen (or, before its establishment, with “Qiu Chuji’s lineage”) is Wu Shouyang (1574–1644), deemed to be the founder of the Wu-Liu branch of Neidan with Liu Huayang (1735–99) who, one and a half centuries later, asserted to be his disciple. This branch is distinguished by the concurrent use of Buddhist and Taoist methods for meditation and physiological practices, respectively. Its dual foundations are also shown in the titles of Wu Shouyang’s *Xian Fo hezong yulu* (Recorded Sayings on the Common Origin of the Immortals and the Buddhas) and Liu Huayang’s *Huiming jing* (Book of Wisdom and Life; Wilhelm 1929 and Wong 1998; the attribution to Liu Huayang may not be authentic).

### The Five Schools

In the late Qing period, several earlier and contemporary Neidan lineages were arranged under five denominations:

1. Northern Lineage (Beizong), founded by Wang Zhe
2. Southern Lineage (Nanzong), initiated by Zhang Boduan
3. Central Branch (Zhongpai), initiated by Li Daochun
4. Western Branch (Xipai), founded by Li Xiyue
5. Eastern Branch (Dongpai), founded by Lu Xixing

The five denominations refer to the geographical origins of the respective founders or initiators (the Central Branch is also said to refer to Li Daochun’s emphasis on the concept of the “center”, mentioned in the

### “Secret of the Golden Flower”

When we circulate the Light, all the Yin and Yang Breaths of Heaven and Earth coalesce. . . .

According to the instructions to begin the practice, within Being there seems to be Non-Being. After a long time, when the practice is completed and outside one's person there is another person, then within Non-Being is born Being.

The Light becomes real after one hundred days of concentrated practice: at that time it becomes Spirit-Fire (*shenhuo*). After one hundred days, the Light spontaneously gathers, and the one particle of True Yang suddenly generates the Millet Pearl (*shuzhu*), just like after husband and wife conjoin there is an embryo. You should be quiescent in order to attend to it. The circulation of the Light is the Fire Times (*huohou*).

*Jinhua zongzhi* (Ultimate Teachings on the Golden Flower)

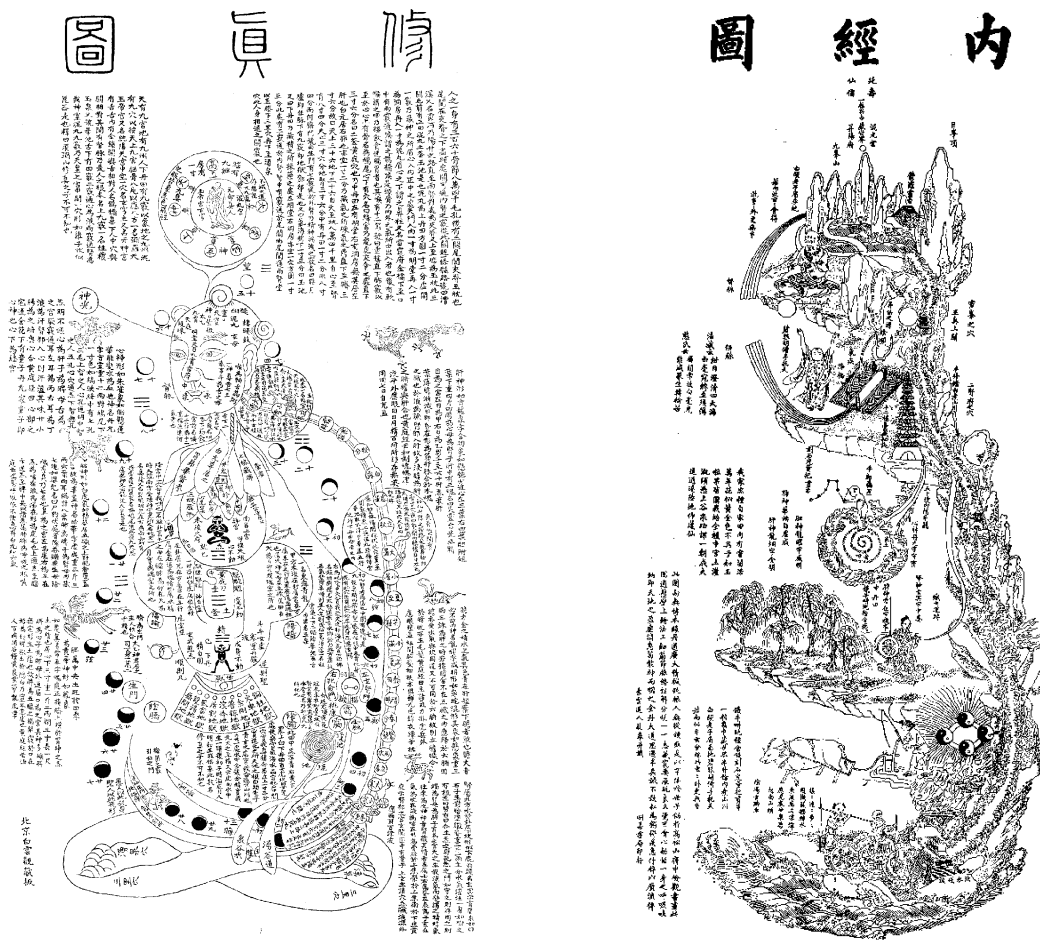
title of his major work). Both Lu Xixing (1520–1601 or 1606) and Li Xiyue (1806–56) maintained to have received teachings from Lü Dongbin, the above-mentioned Immortal who rose to prominence in Qing-dynasty Taoism. Lu Xixing is one of the main representatives of the sexual interpretation of Neidan. Li Xiyue's teachings are based on those of Lu Xixing and of the Southern Lineage.

### Other Ming-Qing texts

Several important Ming- and Qing-dynasty works can hardly be classified under any of the denominations listed above. The best-known among them is the *Secret of the Golden Flower*, so entitled by Richard Wilhelm when he translated it in 1929 (the original title is *Jinhua zongzhi*, or *Ultimate Teachings on the Golden Flower*). This work, dating from the 1700s, is renowned for its description of the practice of “circulating light” (*huiguang*) within the practitioner's person. Min Yide (1748–



## 6: Main Neidan Lineages and Masters



Figs. 5-6. *Xiu Zhen tu* (left) and *Nei Jing tu* (right).

1836) placed it at the head of the textual corpus of the Jin'gai lineage of Longmen (Esposito 2001).

Mention is also deserved here by two other famous works that contain textual elements, but are centered on a chart of the human body (figs. 5-6). The *Xiu Zhen tu* (Chart for the Cultivation of Reality; Despeux 1994) is known in several variant exemplars, dating from the early 1800s onwards. The *Nei Jing tu* (Chart of the Inner Warp) is drawn on a stele, dating from the late 19th century, found on the walls of a building in the Baiyun guan (Abbey of the White Clouds) in Beijing, the seat of the

Quanzhen/Longmen lineage. The two charts present different models of the body, displaying its main features and loci according to the respective views. The *Neijing tu*, in particular, reclaims the ancient theme of the “inner landscape” (Despeux 1996) and also includes elements drawn from the early Taoist meditation texts.

### Liu Yiming

#### The Opening

Let me tell you one thing. If you want to know this Opening, it is in the land where the six senses do not stick, in the place where the five agents do not reach. “Vague and indistinct!” Within there is an opening. “Dim and obscure!” Within there is a gate. It opens and closes by itself. If you call out, it replies; if you knock, it responds. Luminous and bright! Complete and accomplished! Those who are deluded are a thousand miles away from it; those who are awakened are right in front of it.

*Xiuzhen biannan* (Discussions on the Cultivation of Reality)

In 1819, Liu Yiming (1734–1821) published the expanded version of his anthology of Neidan works, entitled *Daoshu shi'er zhong* (Twelve Books on the Dao, but actually consisting of about twenty works). The collection contains commentaries to major texts, such as the *Wuzhen pian* (Cleary 1987) and the *Cantong qi*, and several independent works. Liu Yiming propounds a radically spiritual interpretation of the scriptural sources of his tradition. His writing is characterized by doctrinal depth and use of a plain language, a combination of traits that is rare in Neidan literature.



# 7

## NEIDAN: GENERAL PERSPECTIVES

Internal Alchemy could easily be construed as a transposition of the “external” practices of Waidan to an inner plane. This view would be extremely reductive. Needless to say, Neidan derives several basic terms from Waidan that refer to alchemical operations (e.g., “refine”, “compound”), instruments (“tripod”, “stove”), ingredients (“lead”, “mercury”, “cinnabar”, “silver”), and, most important, the idea of the Elixir itself. Despite the obvious analogies, however, Neidan owes its origins to the Taoist meditation methods on the inner gods more than it does to Waidan. Elements borrowed from those methods are combined with concepts and with emblems drawn from the standard Chinese cosmological system, with alchemical terminology and images, and with fragments of other doctrines and practices that will be mentioned shortly.

However paradoxical it may appear, this unique combination of components results in the virtually complete disappearance of the inner gods themselves. Their dismissal has clear reasons. Incorporating the inner gods into Neidan would require an impossible “re-mapping” of the inner pantheon onto a different cosmological model; moreover, it would be unfeasible to represent by means of deities, either internal or external, the reintegration of each ontologic stage (multiplicity, duality, unity) into the previous stage, and even more so the return to the state of Non-Being.

For these reasons, the images of the inner gods included in some of the Neidan charts of the “inner landscape” serve to depict an ideal model of the human body, but do not indicate an active function of the gods themselves in the Neidan practices. The only exception is the Red Child, the innermost deity of early Taoist meditation. When he reappears in Neidan, however, he is not anymore a god possessed by all human beings, but an image of the Elixir to be generated through the alchemical practice.

### The Neidan synthesis

Neidan masters are fond of stating that their tradition synthesizes the Three Teachings (*sanjiao*) i.e., Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, but the components that one may identify in Neidan as a whole are much more numerous. Its texts borrow teachings from the *Daode jing*, vocabulary from the *Zhuangzi*, cosmological emblems from the *Book of Changes*, fragments of methods from early Taoist meditation, physiological practices (especially those concerned with breathing) from the disciplines of “Nourishing Life” (*yangsheng*), views of the human body from traditional medicine, alchemical language from Waidan, doctrinal notions from Buddhism, and idioms from Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. As it may be expected, the borrowings occur to different degrees of extent and depth according to the various subtraditions and their individual representatives.

Given the variety of components, it seems meaningless to see any of them as playing an influence on Neidan. Each element functions instead as one of many “building blocks” that masters and authors, centered on a fundamental way of seeing, use at will to frame their discourses and methods. Several masters, for example, point out that alchemy can only

be understood in light of the *Daode jing*, which they see as “the origin of the Way of the Golden Elixir”. Correlative cosmology provides images (*xiang*) used not only to show how the cosmic patterns of space and time are replicated in the practice, but also, as Li Daochun says, to “give form to the Formless by the word, and thus manifest the authentic and absolute Dao” (quoted in ⇒Robinet 2011:18).

The specific roles and relative importance of these components are often explicitly acknowledged. The alchemical discourse has its roots in metaphysical principles, and uses correlative cosmology to explicate the ultimate unity of the cosmos with the absolute principle that generates it. The final purpose of Neidan, however, is to transcend the cosmic domain and “return to Emptiness” (*huanxu*). Words, images, and metaphors, therefore, are often used with an awareness of their temporary function. To quote Li Daochun again: “There is a mechanism that surpasses them. This is not easy to explain, but one should comprehend beyond words” (⇒Robinet, *ibid.*)

### Alchemical language and levels of interpretation

Nonetheless, the possibility of understanding statements and technical terms in different ways and at different levels is a peculiarity of Neidan and of alchemy as a whole, wherever it has existed. One of the features intrinsic to the alchemical language is especially important in this regard. Many terms refer not only to the material entities or phenomena that they literally denote, but also to formless principles; in these cases, entities and phenomena are seen as instances of those principles, and their names are synonymous and interchangeable with one another. For example, “True Lead” (*zhenqian*) literally denotes refined lead, but connotes the principle of True Yang (*zhenyang*) found within the Yin. “True

### Images of Yin and Yang

The image of the Dragon-Tiger undergoes a thousand transformations and ten thousand changes, and its transcendence is divine and unfathomable. This is why we use it to represent the ingredients, we establish it as Tripod and Furnace, and we move it with the Fire regime. By analogy, it is Kan and Li; by substitution, it is Metal and Fire; by naming, it is the boy and the girl; by conjoining, it is the husband and the wife. All these different names constitute the wondrous function (*yong*) of the Dragon and the Tiger. By virtue of their divine animation (*ling gan*), we call them ingredients; because they bring things to achievement, we call them Tripod and Furnace; by virtue of their transformations, we call them Fire regime; because they cross each other and join to one another, we call them Kan and Li; because they are firm and straight, we call them Metal and Wood; because they ascend and descend, we call them boy and girl; because they wondrously harmonize with one another, we call them husband and wife.

*Zhonghe ji* (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology); trl. Robinet, *The World Upside Down*, 30-31

Lead” therefore is another name of True Yang within Yin, and in this function is a synonym of all terms that denote other instances of the same principle — e.g., the agent Metal, the trigram Kan ☵, and the Breath of the kidneys. One could, therefore, understand True Lead with reference to principles of metaphysics, to cosmological patterns, to Waidan methods, and to physiological practices; and one could mention Kan ☵ to mean Metal, or True Lead to mean the Breath of the kidneys, and so forth.

It is essentially for this reason that the alchemical portions of the *Cantong qi* are concerned with Waidan — the form in which alchemy existed when the text was composed — but can be read as descriptions of Neidan. Another example is the interpretation of Neidan principles and texts in terms of sexual practices. This reading is not only based on the imagery of the alchemical language, where the conjunction of man and woman is one of the most frequent metaphors for the

joining of Yin and Yang. Its main theoretical support is an extension of the example given above: the Yin from which True Yang — or True Lead — should be “collected” (*cai*) at the initial stage of the practice is not native lead (Yin), or the cosmos itself (also Yin), but is the female body (another instance of the Yin principle), and the “collection” occurs through sexual intercourse.

While one of the tasks of alchemy is to reveal the analogies among different domains, and the ties that exist between all of them and the principle that generates them, the practitioner’s or the reader’s personal approach determine and qualify his or her comprehension and interpretation. It is opportune to remind with regard to this point that, according to one of the basic principles shared by all traditional doctrines, a comprehension of the higher doctrinal levels affords an understanding of the lower ones, while the opposite is impossible.

### Criticism of other practices

Aware that the line separating their tradition from other forms of doctrine and practice often appears to be thin, the authors of several

#### Alchemical metaphors

The way of alchemy entirely consists of metaphors (*xiang*). It takes Lead and Mercury as substances, but one must know that the “essence of Lead” and the “marrow of Mercury” are nothing but metaphors. It is based on the terms Li and Kan, but one must know that the “Kan boy” and the “Li girl” are nothing but empty terms. It uses the forms of the Dragon and the Tiger, but one must know that the “Dragon-Fire” and the “Tiger-Water” have no form. It talks about the “yellow sprout,” the “divine water,” and the “flowery pond,” but these are things that can neither be seen nor used.

Xiao Yanzhi (mid-13th century), in *Xiuzhen shishu*, chapter 9; trl. **Robinet**, *The World Upside Down*, 19

texts emphasize the differences that exist between their teachings and the sources from which they borrow. The earliest example is found in

### Criticism of other practices

People of later times have not understood the discourses about “practice” (*youzuo*). Some circulate their breath between *zi* and *wu*, others cycle [the Essence along the path of] the River Chariot; some join [the breaths of] the heart and the kidneys to one another, others connect the channels of Function and Control (*rendu*); some gather their breath behind their brain, others cause their breath to surge up to their sinciput; some harmonize the breath of inspiration and expiration, others refine their sexual essence. . . .

There are more than one thousand [methods] like these. Although their paths are not the same, they all cling to forms in an identical way. If you think that this is the Way of “doing,” you have missed it by far.

Liu Yiming, *Xiuzhen houbian* (Further Discussions on the Cultivation of Reality)

the *Cantong qi* (sec. 26 and 36), which devotes much attention to methods deemed to be inadequate for true realization. These methods consist of non-alchemical practices, including breathing, meditation on the inner gods, sexual practices, and worship of spirits and minor deities; and of Waidan methods that are not based on the conjunction of Qian and Kun, or Lead and Mercury.

Similar warnings about the performance of incorrect methods, or the incorrect interpretation of certain notions and terms, are also found in major Neidan texts (including the above-mentioned *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji*, the *Wuzhen pian*, and works by Chen Zhixu and by Liu Yiming), often becoming even more radical. The most complete illustration in this regard is found in Li Daochun’s *Zhonghe ji*. Li Daochun thoroughly rejects sexual practices and Waidan, and assigns a low rank to physiological practices — including *daoyin* (a form of gymnastics), breathing

techniques, and diets — and to several methods of meditation and visualization. With regard to Neidan, he distinguishes among three progressively higher “vehicles” (*sheng*, a term borrowed from Buddhism) that may be characterized as physiological, cosmological, and spiritual. Above them, Li Daochun places the Supreme One Vehicle (*zuishang yisheng*), which he calls the “Wondrous Way of Supreme and Utmost Reality” and — an important detail — does not associate with any particular practice in the conventional sense of the term. To describe this ultimate level, Li Daochun uses both Taoist expressions, such as “inner nature and worldly existence becoming one thing”, and Buddhist concepts, such as the joining of “concentration (*ding*, *samādhi*) and wisdom (*hui*, *prajñā*)”. Although Li Daochun does not use these terms in his essay, the distinction between the three lower degrees and the Supreme One Vehicle of Neidan mirrors the one made in the *Cantong qi* between the ways of “inferior virtue” and “superior virtue”.

### The Supreme One Vehicle

The Supreme One Vehicle is the wondrous Way of the highest ultimate Truth. The tripod is the Great Void and the furnace is the Great Ultimate. The foundation of the Elixir is clarity and tranquillity; the mother of the Elixir is non-doing (*wuwei*). Lead and Mercury are Nature and Life; Water and Fire are concentration and wisdom. The conjunction of Water and Fire is ceasing desires and terminating anger; “Metal and Wood pairing with each other” is merging Nature and qualities. “Washing and bathing” is cleansing the mind and clearing away cogitation. “Closing firmly” is maintaining sincerity and concentrating the Intention. The “three essentials” are precepts, concentration, and wisdom; the Mysterious Barrier is the Center. . . .

This is the wondrousness of the Supreme One Vehicle. Those who are accomplished can perform this.

*Zhonghe ji* (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology)

## 8

# THE INTERNAL ELIXIR AND THE VIEW OF THE HUMAN BEING

Physiological practices are often the most conspicuous aspect of Neidan, but compounding the Internal Elixir involves the whole human being and not only the body in the strict sense. The entire process is directed by the Heart (*xin*), seat of the Spirit (*shen*) and main symbolic center of the human being. The Heart operates by means of the “True Intention” (*zhenyi*), the active faculty that, through its association with Spirit, enables the conjunction of Yin and Yang (the Two) and the generation and nourishment of the Internal Elixir (the One Breath of the Dao).

### The Elixir in Neidan

In the Neidan view, the Elixir is equivalent to the original state of Being and represents its attainment or recovery. The result of the final stage of the practice is defined as the return to “emptiness” (*xu*), the state in which no boundaries or distinctions occur between the absolute and the relative. Being a gradual process, though, the practice operates primarily within the domain that one is called to transcend. Its main purpose is to fully reveal the limitations of the ordinary view of that domain, show how it is in fact aligned to principles that preside over the self-manifestation of the Dao, and lead the practitioner to the realization of its fundamental non-duality with the absolute principle.



## 8: The Internal Elixir and the View of the Human Being

The actual focus of this process is neither “internal” nor “external”. Nonetheless, it is frequently illustrated through the metaphor of the creation of “a person outside one’s person” (or “a self outside oneself”, *shen zhi wai shen*; Despeux 1986:111–12), which represents the acquirement of transcendence and is defined as the “true person” (*zhenshen*; compare the *zhenwo* or “true self” of early Taoist meditation).(\*) In this case, the main stages of the practice are described as the conception, gestation, and birth of an embryo, which grows to become a perfect likeness of the practitioner and personifies his realized state. In another view—not mutually exclusive with the previous one, and sometimes presented alongside it—the Internal Elixir is seen as already possessed by every human being, and identical to one’s own innate realized state. In his commentary to the *Wuzhen pian*, Liu Yiming expresses this view by saying: “All human beings have this Golden Elixir

### The Golden Elixir

“Golden Elixir” is another name for one’s fundamental nature, inchoate but complete. There is no other Golden Elixir outside one’s fundamental nature. All human beings have this Golden Elixir complete in themselves: it is entirely realized in everybody. It is neither more in a sage, nor less in an ordinary person. It is the seed of the Immortals and the Buddhas, the root of the worthies and the sages.

Liu Yiming, Commentary to *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality)

(\*) To prevent any misunderstanding, it should be reminded that *shen* 神 “spirit” and *shen* 身 “person” are two homophonous but different words. To avoid further ambiguities, it should also be added that in certain contexts, like the present one, *shen* “person” can be translated as “self”. This word, however, does not refer to the “self” as a psychological entity and refers instead to the whole person. “Body”, another frequent translation of *shen*, seems to be reductive and even confusing in the present context.

### “Inverting the course”

Those who have great wisdom reverse the cycles of creation and transformation. They are not seized by the process of creation and transformation and are not molded by Yin and Yang. They are not dragged by the ten thousand things and are not pulled by the ten thousand conditions. They plant a lotus in a fire and tow a boat through muddy waters. They borrow the laws (*fa*) of the world to cultivate the laws of the Dao, and accord to the Dao of men but fulfill the Dao of Heaven. They thoroughly uproot the accumulated dust of sense objects and entirely clear away the acquired external influences. Their destiny (*or* life, *Ming*) is ruled by themselves, and is not ruled by Heaven. They revert to their “original face” and escape from the cycles of time. They transcend the Three Worlds [of desire, form, and formlessness], and become as incorruptible as *vajra* (diamond).

Liu Yiming, *Xiangyan poyi* (Smashing Doubts on Symbolic Language)

complete in themselves: it is entirely realized in everybody”. The same view leads Yu Yan (1258–1314) to state in his commentary to the *Cantong qi*: “The Golden Elixir is in front of your eyes”.

### “Inversion”

Beyond these and other representations, one the main features shared by all descriptions of the Neidan process is the idea of “inversion” (*ni* or *diandao*; ⇒ **Robinet 2011**:1–15). As shown in more detail below, the practice is typically framed as the gradual reintegration of each of the primary components of Being, namely Essence, Breath, and Spirit (*jing*, *qi*, and *shen*), into the one that precedes it in the ontological hierarchy. The process begins with the lowest stage and ends with the highest one, culminating in the reversion (*huan*) to the state of Non-Being (*wu*), or Emptiness (*xu*, *kong*). The typical formulation of this process is “refining Essence to transmute it into Breath,” “refining Breath to

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transmute it into Spirit,” and “refining Spirit to return to Emptiness.” The Internal Elixir is fully achieved at the conclusion of this process.

Authors of Neidan texts have related these stages to the passage of the *Daode jing* (sec. 42) that states: “The Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things” (see the table below). According to one of the ways in which this passage has been understood, the Dao first generates Unity, which comprises the two complementary principles of Yin and Yang. After Yin and Yang differentiate from one another, they again conjoin and generate the “three,” which is the product of their conjunction. The “ten thousand things” are the totality of entities produced by the continuous reiteration of this process. The stages of the Neidan practice gradually invert this sequence by eliminating the distinctions between each stage and the one immediately above it.

COSMOGONY: <i>shun</i> 順 (“going with the course”)		NEIDAN: <i>ni</i> 逆 (“inverting the course”)	
	Dao 道		Emptiness ( <i>xu</i> 虛)
“The <i>Dao</i> generates the One”	↓	↑	from Spirit to Emptiness
	One —		Spirit ( <i>shen</i> 神)
“The One generates the Two”	↓	↑	from Breath to Spirit
	Two ≡, ≡		Breath ( <i>qi</i> 氣)
“The Two generate the Three”	↓	↑	from Essence to Breath
	Three ≡, ≡		Essence ( <i>jing</i> 精)
“The Three generate the 10,000 things”	↓	↑	“laying out the foundations”
	10,000 things ( <i>wanwu</i> 萬物)		

On the left, the “downward” stages of cosmogony. On the right, the corresponding “upward” stages of the Neidan practice.

### *Xing and Ming*

*Xing* is the perfect Spirit (*shen*) prior to Heaven: it is the One Numen. *Ming* is the perfect Essence (*jing*) prior to Heaven: it is the One Breath. Essence and Spirit are the roots of *Xing* and *Ming*...

If those who cultivate their *Ming* do not understand their *Xing*, how can they escape the cycles of kalpas? If those who see their *Xing* are not aware of their *Ming*, how can they finally return [to the Origin]? ...

The superior persons jointly realize *Xing* and *Ming*. First they hold the precepts and stabilize their wisdom, and in this way empty their minds. Then they refine their Essence, Breath, and Spirit, and in this way preserve their bodies. When the body is settled, the basis of *Ming* is permanently firm; when the mind is empty and clear, the foundation of *Xing* is entirely illuminated. When your *Xing* is completely illuminated, there are no coming and going; when your *Ming* is permanently firm, there are no death and birth.

*Zhonghe ji* (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology)

### *Xing and Ming*

Although Neidan encompasses the two main poles of human existence, which in Western terms would be called “spiritual” and “physical”, one of the criteria used to differentiate its subtraditions and the respective practices is the relative emphasis given to one or the other aspect. The scope of Chinese terms that refer to those two poles, *Xing* and *Ming*, though, is wider.

*Xing* and *Ming* constitute two cardinal concepts in the Neidan view of the human being, pertaining to one’s superindividual features, on the one hand, and to one’s individual existence, on the other. *Xing* denotes one’s “inner nature”, whose properties transcend individuality and are identical to those of pure Being and, even beyond, Non-Being. Neidan texts often discourse on *Xing* by using Buddhist terms, such as “one’s own true enlightened nature” (*zhenru juexing*), and Buddhist expressions, such as “seeing one’s nature” (*jianxing*).

## 8: The Internal Elixir and the View of the Human Being

*Ming* means in the first place “command”, “order”, but the senses of this word also include “life”, “existence”, and “lifespan”, as well as “destiny” or “fate”. With regard to Neidan, moreover, *Ming* it is often interpreted in Western-language works as “vital force” (not a literal translation). In the Neidan view, these different meanings and senses are related to one another. *Ming* can be defined as the imprint that each individual receives upon being generated: one’s existence is owed to Heaven’s command, which determines one’s place and function in the world and thus one’s “destiny”, which one is expected to fulfill in life. Moreover, each individual in his or her life is provided with an allotment of “vital force” that differs among different persons, but is bound to decrease and finally to exhaust itself. While one’s *Xing* is unborn and is therefore immortal, everything under the domain of *Ming* has a beginning and an end.

With reference to the practice, different subtraditions within Neidan are sometimes distinguished according to the priority that they give to either *Xing* or *Ming*. In the Northern Lineage, in particular, the practice begins with the work on *Xing*. In the Southern Lineage, instead, the first stage of the practice gives emphasis to *Ming* above *Xing*; the second one, to *Xing* above *Ming*; and the third one focuses exclusively on *Xing*. Several authors, nevertheless, insist that *Xing* and *Ming* should be cultivated together, using the term “joint cultivation of *Xing* and *Ming*” (*xingming shuangxiu*).

## 9

# THE PRACTICE OF THE INTERNAL ELIXIR

Detailed descriptions of the Neidan practice in Western languages are found in Despeux 1979:48–82; Robinet 1995:147–64; and ⇒Wang Mu 2011. Below is a summary of the main points.

### The ingredients: Essence, Breath, Spirit

Just like Waidan compounds its elixirs using the lowest and humblest components of the world—the lifeless stones and metals—and allows them to return to the perfection of gold, so does Neidan start off with the basic constituents of the cosmos and the human being and reverts them to their original state. In the Neidan view, these constituents are *jing*, or “essence”, *qi*, or “breath”, and *shen*, or “spirit”, together called the Three Treasures (*sanbao*). Each of them has two values, with regard to their precosmic natures and their aspects in the manifested world.

(\*) Translations and definitions of these terms are complex. *Qi*, in particular, is also translated as “energy”, “pneuma”, and in several other ways. I use “breath”, which covers some, but by no means all of its senses. The French word *souffle*, or its equivalents in other Roman languages, renders more of its nuances.

In their precosmic aspects, *shen*, *qi*, and *jing* (in this order) represent three stages in the process of self-manifestation of the Dao, from the state of Emptiness to the coagulation of the Essence that generates the cosmos. *Shen* is the principle that presides over the manifestation of non-material entities; *jing* is the principle that presides over the manifestation of material entities; and *qi* is the principle that maintains the whole cosmos throughout its extent and duration. In their precosmic aspects, *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* are usually prefixed by the word *yuan*, “original” (*yuanjing*, *yuanqi*, *yuanshen*).

In the manifested world, the three components take on different aspects, and their names take on additional meanings. *Shen* refers to what exists without a material form, from the deities in the heavens (also called *shen*, “gods”) to the human mind (e.g., the “cognitive spirit”, *shishen*). In the human being, *qi* appears specifically as breath. The main materialization of *jing* is semen in males, and menstrual blood in females.

### Essence, Breath, Spirit

Essence, Breath, and Spirit affect one another. When they follow the course, they form the human being; when they invert the course, they generate the Elixir.

What is the meaning of “following the course” (*shun*)? “The One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things.” Therefore Emptiness transmutes itself into Spirit, Spirit transmutes itself into Breath, Breath transmutes itself into Essence, Essence transmutes itself into form, and form becomes the human being.

What is the meaning of “inverting the course” (*ni*)? The ten thousand things hold the Three, the Three return to the Two, the Two return to the One. Those who know this Way look after their Spirit and guard their corporeal form. They nourish the corporeal form to refine the Essence, accumulate the Essence to transmute it into Breath, refine the Breath to merge it with Spirit, and refine the Spirit to revert to Emptiness. Then the Golden Elixir is achieved.

Chen Zhixu, *Jindan dayao* (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir)

Neidan works on the material aspects of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*, but intends to restore the respective “original” aspects. The practices to cease the flow of thoughts should lead one to “enter the state of quiescence” (*rujing*). Inhalation and exhalation are first regulated, but are then replaced by the spontaneous circulation of the “internal Breath”, called “embryonic breathing” (*taixi*). Semen, sometimes called the “essence of the intercourse” (*jiaogan jing*), should not be wasted, but a statement attributed to Bai Yuchan concerning the essence involved in the Neidan practices has left its mark in the literature: “This essence is not the essence of the intercourse: it is the saliva in the mouth of the Jade Sovereign” (quoted in ⇒Wang Mu 2011:46).



Fig. 7. Essence, Breath, and Spirit shown as three joined circles in the practitioner's body.  
*Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Joint Cultivation of Nature and Life).



### Cinnabar Fields

The Neidan practice involves several loci in the human body, some of which are not “physical” in the common sense of the term. Two of them are especially important. The first is the Cinnabar Fields, or *dantian*, which are located in the regions of the abdomen, the heart, and the brain, respectively, but are devoid of material counterparts. They play a major role in Taoist breathing, meditation, and Neidan practices. The second (described in the next section) is two channels that run along the front and the back of the body.

The lower Cinnabar Field is the *dantian* proper and is the seat of Essence (*jing*). Different sources place it at 1.3, 2, 2.4, 3, or 3.6 inches (*cun*) below or—more correctly, according to some sources—behind the navel. In the first stage of the Neidan process, the Internal Elixir is generated in this Field.

The middle Cinnabar Field is at the center of the chest according to some authors, or between the heart and the navel according to others; in another view, it is essentially equivalent to the Heart itself as the center of the human being. It is the seat of Breath (*qi*) and is also called Yellow Court (*huangting*), Crimson Palace (*jianggong*), or Mysterious-Female (*xuanpin*, an image of the conjunction of Yin and Yang). In the second stage of the Neidan process, the Elixir is moved from the lower to the middle Field and is nourished there.

The upper Cinnabar Field is located in the region of the brain and is the seat of Spirit (*shen*). Usually called *niwan*, or Muddy Pellet, it is divided into nine “palaces” or “chambers” arranged in two rows, one above the other. *Niwan* denotes both the upper Field as a whole, and the innermost palace or chamber (the third one in the lower row). Moving the Elixir to the upper Field marks the third and final stage of the Neidan process.

## The Function and Control Vessels and the “Fire Times”

### Fire Times

The *Seal* (\*) and the treatises, the scriptures and the songs expound ultimate Reality, but do not commit the Fire Times to writing.

If you want to know the oral instructions and comprehend the mysterious points, you must discuss them in detail with a divine immortal.

Even if you discern the Vermilion Cinnabar and the Black Lead, it will be useless if you do not know the Fire Times.

On the whole, it all depends on the force of practice: with the slightest error, the Elixir would not coalesce.

(\*) I.e., the *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three)

*Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality)

According to the Chinese medical views, the human body contains twelve “ordinary channels” (*zheng-jing*) and eight “extraordinary channels” (*qijing*). (Both sets of channels are often called “meridians” in English, especially with regard to their use in acupuncture.) The eight extraordinary channels are also known as the eight vessels (*bamaï*). In *Neidan*, the most important among them are the Function vessel (*dumaï*) and the Control vessel (*renmaï*), which run vertically in the front and the back of the body, respectively. The circular route formed by the conjunction of the two vessels is called River Chariot (*heche*). During the preliminary stage of the practice, both vessels are cleared so that, when the practice actually begins, the essence (*jing*) may circulate along their path.

The circulation of the essence along the River Chariot is regulated in accordance with the system of the Fire Times (*huohou*; ⇒ Wang Mu 2011:75-87). Each cy-

cle is divided into two main parts, the first (Yang) called “fierce fire” (or “martial fire,” *wuhuo*), and the second one (Yin), “gentle fire” (or “civil fire,” *wenhuo*). In addition, the cycle is divided into twelve parts (fig. 8), represented by the same twelve hexagrams that mark the stages of heating the elixir in Waidan (fig. 4). Several texts emphasize that the Fire Times constitute one of the most secret parts of the alchemical work, and that masters adapt them to the qualifications and the needs of their disciples.

### Stages of the practice

In its most widespread codification, the Neidan practice consists of a preliminary phase followed by three main three stages. The three main stages have conventional lengths of 100 days (replicating one of the prescribed periods needed to compound the elixir in Waidan), ten months (the duration of human gestation by Chinese reckoning), and nine years (the time that, according to tradition, Bodhidharma spent in meditation facing a wall after he transmitted Chan Buddhism



Fig. 8. The twelve stages of the Fire Times.



Fig. 9. The alchemical process represented by the main trigrams of the *Book of Changes*. Right to left: (1) Exchanging the inner lines of Kan ☵ and Li ☲. (2) Joining Qian ☰ and Kun ☷. (3) Qian ☰, here an image of the One Breath of the Dao. The three stages are marked as “Initial Barrier”, “Median Barrier”, and “Upper Barrier”, respectively. The first is defined as “doing”, the second as “interaction of doing and non-doing”, and the third as “non-doing”. Li Daochun, *Zhonghe ji* (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology).

from India to China). Many texts point out that these lengths are symbolic and should not be understood literally.

Several authors have matched various facets of this process to passages of the *Cantong qi* and the *Wuzhen pian*, but neither text mentions it. As far as we know, the elaboration of the three-stage process dates from around the 11th–12th centuries. The three-stage pattern, moreover, exists in several variants, and a significant number of Neidan texts describe other patterns (e.g., the *Lingbao bifa*) or do not mention any pattern at all.

The preliminary phase is called “Laying the Foundations” (*zhuji*). Its purpose is to replenish Original Essence, Original Breath, and Original Spirit so that they may be used in the following stages. The relevant

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methods are related—but not equivalent—to those of present-day Qigong (⇒Wang Mu 2011:31, 43, 64) and do not involve the compounding of the Elixir.

The first stage proper is “Refining Essence to Transmute it into Breath” (*lianjing huaqi*), also called Barrier of the Hundred Days (*bairi guan*). Its purpose is to generate a Breath made of the union of Original Essence and Breath, called the External Medicine (*waiyao*). By means of repeated breathing cycles, essence is circulated along the route of the above-mentioned River Chariot: it rises in the back of the body along the Function Vessel to the upper Cinnabar Field, and from there descends in the front of the body along the Control Vessel until it reaches the lower Cinnabar Field, where it is sealed and coagulates. This path of circulating the essence is regulated by the system of the Fire Times; it inverts the ordinary tendency of the essence to flow downwards and be wasted.

The second stage is “Refining Breath to Transmute it into Spirit” (*lianqi huashen*), also called Barrier of the Ten Months (*shiyue guan*). Its purpose is to generate a Spirit made of the union of Original Breath (obtained in the previous stage) and Spirit. Breath and Spirit are the True Water in the lungs (Yin within Yang) and the True Fire in the reins (Yang within Yin). Their conjunction produces the Internal Medicine (*neiyao*), which is nourished between the lower and the middle Cinnabar Fields. At the end of this stage, Essence, Breath, and Spirit are combined into one entity.

The third and final stage is “Refining Spirit to Return to Emptiness” (*lianshen huanxu*), also called the Barrier of the Nine Years (*jiunian guan*). Its purpose is to further refine the Spirit obtained in the previous stage so that one may attain Emptiness and Non-Being. This stage is described as the joining of the External and the Internal Medicines, which results in the formation of the Great Medicine (*dayao*). The practice ends with the adept’s return to Emptiness, or the Dao.

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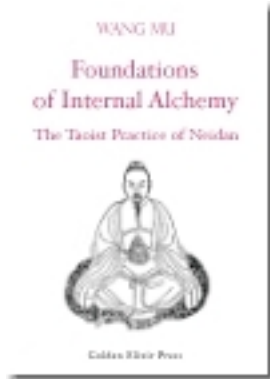
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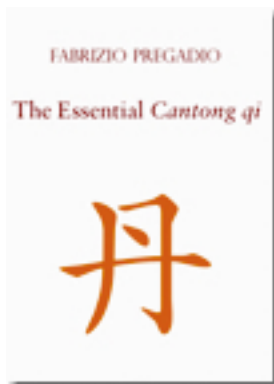


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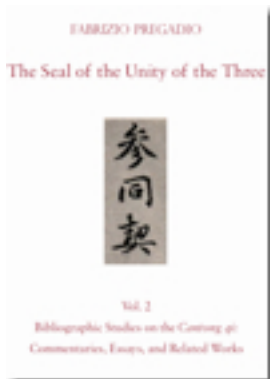


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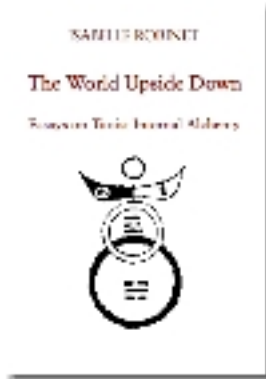
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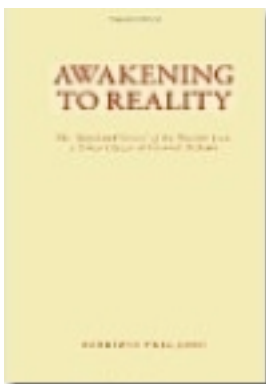
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