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Introduction

Why do people die? What determines their destiny? Is it possible for ordinary human beings to take destiny into their own hands, to overcome death and attain immortality? What is the best way to do this? Proponents of Daoist self-cultivation known as internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) believe they have found answers to these questions.

This book examines the teachings of the Ming-dynasty (1368-1644) alchemist, Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520-1601 or 1606). Lu was born and lived most of his life in Xinghua 興化 county near Yangzhou 揚州 (modern Jiangsu). Having failed to pass the imperial examination, he spent his life writing treatises on internal alchemy and composing commentaries on Daoist and Buddhist scriptures. Also known as the founder of the Eastern School (Dongpai 東派) of internal alchemy, Lu expounds its theory and practice in his numerous writings, explaining the reasons for death and delineating the path to immortality.

Scholars tend to regard Lu as a proponent of sexual cultivation, but I question this. He never explicitly describes sexual practices, and sexual interpretations of his writings hinge largely on the literal reading of the semi-sexual terminology he uses. Some scholars assume that, while his works discuss no specific sexual techniques, as a member of the Eastern School he received practical instructions orally (Hao 1994, 291). But, as I show below, the Eastern School is in fact a *post-facto* creation of Daoist historiography and has never really existed. Thus, it could not have served as a vehicle to receive or transmit secret knowledge.

Lu never studied with a human master, did not receive secret transmission from organized groups, was not formally ordained, and generally had no connection to Daoist institutions. He had no disciples and never founded any school. Instead, he claimed transmission of alchemical knowledge from the legendary immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 (b. 796), whom he encountered through spirit-writing (*fuji* 扶乩/ 箕, *fuluan* 扶鸞) via the planchette.

In other words, Lu Xixing was a man of letters whose connection to internal alchemy came through reading and writing books. He was a literatus, an intellectual who developed a coherent system of self-cultivation through the study of alchemical and Daoist classics. His

approach to this cultivation is rather straightforward: he repeatedly stresses that the path to immortality is simple and easy, that any commoner can reach success by doing what ordinary people do every day while actively employing the principle of yin and yang.

Lu explains the theory and practice of internal alchemy lucidly and systematically, providing an invaluable source for its study. Examining his teachings can help us interpret alchemical scriptures, understand the basic tenets of alchemical theory and practice, and explore the religious life of Ming-dynasty literati or scholars-officials (*shi daifu* 士大夫).

Internal Alchemy

Internal alchemy has been the most important form of Daoist self-cultivation since the Song dynasty (960-1279). A complex system, it combines Daoist breathing practices and various meditation techniques with the terminology of external or laboratory alchemy (*wai-dan* 外丹), medical theories, cosmology, and the teaching of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes).¹

The purpose of internal alchemy is the creation of an immortal body, known as the yang-spirit (*yangshen* 陽神). Alchemists skillfully manipulate the fundamental constituents of their nature, such as essence (*jing* 精), *qi* 氣 and spirit (*shen* 神), to create the elixir of immortality inside their physical body, and on this basis generate the yang-spirit.

Scriptures explain the practice through complex allegorical terminology, to a large extent derived from the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three in Accordance with the Book of Changes; hereafter called *Cantong qi*), traditionally ascribed to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽 (2nd c. CE; see Pregadio 2011). This core alchemical text describes the functioning of the universe and the principles of internal alchemy using the hexagrams of the *Yijing* as well as the ten heavenly stems (*tiangan* 天干) and twelve earthly branches (*dizhi* 地支) together with various terms borrowed from external alchemy.

Drawing on the *Cantong qi*, Lu's treatises explain self-cultivation from several perspectives. For example, they correlate practice with cosmic processes. Alchemists attain Dao by reproducing the creation

¹ For studies of internal alchemy, see Hao 1994; Huo 2015; Kohn and Wang 2009; Pregadio 2006, 2009, 2014; Robinet 1995.

of the universe, imitating the ebb and flow of yin and yang and unifying the two. They, however, do not merely replicate the cosmogonic process but also reverse it.

The process of self-cultivation runs opposite to that of creation and returns the practitioner to primordial beginning. As Clarke Hudson puts it, “Inner alchemists aim to join yin and yang, and recover primal perfection, through contemplative practice” (2008, 18). Alchemical literature refers to this mode of practice as “going against the flow” (*ni* 逆). Alchemists model the practice on biological gestation and make their spirit and *qi* “copulate” with each other to form the sagely embryo (*shengtai* 聖胎; also rendered immortal embryo or holy fetus), nurture it for ten months, then guide it to leave the body and transform into the yang-spirit.

Alchemists commonly liken the practitioner’s body to the external laboratory. According to Hao Qin, alchemists “take the human body as the elixir chamber (*danfang* 丹房); heart and kidneys as the furnace (*lu* 爐) and cauldron (*ding* 鼎); essence, *qi*, and spirit as the medicine (*yaowu* 藥物);² intention (*yi* 意) and thought (*nian* 念) as well as inhalation and exhalation (*huxi* 呼吸) as fire phasing (*huohou* 火候). They borrow these expressions and use these images to create the elixir inside the body and pursue immortality and transcendence” (1994, 7; Hudson 2008, 215).

Alchemical terminology is highly complex, and this complexity hampers the understanding of relevant treatises. Alchemists use similar language to describe various self-cultivation regimens. As Clarke Hudson has it, “Any alchemical term can be, and historically has been, interpreted in many different ways” (2008, 371).

Alchemists often maintain that to fully comprehend their scriptures, one must receive oral formulas or instructions (*koujue* 口訣) from a perfected master. Thus, in addition to the written works, there was an oral tradition of the secret transmission of alchemical knowledge. The concept of a “school” that alchemists use to describe the history of internal alchemy expresses both written and oral aspects.

² The term *yao* 藥 can be translated as “medicine” or “ingredient.” Alchemists extract the external medicine and use it to heal their later-heaven bodies. At the same time, external medicine forms an ingredient of the internal medicine and the elixir of immortality.

Early Unfolding

Traditional alchemists and contemporary scholars describe the history of internal alchemy in terms of the emergence and evolution of various schools. The term “school” translates the Chinese word *zong* 宗, today combined with the word *pai* 派 (lineage) into the compound *zongpai*. Translations vary. For example, Lowell Skar renders *zong* as “lineage” and calls *pai*, “branch” (in Pregadio 2008, 11-13). Daoists, on the other hand, often use the terms as synonyms, making it hard to distinguish clearly between “lineage,” “branch,” and “school.” In this work *zong* is translated “school,” indicating larger organizations, while *pai* is “lineage” or “branch,” used according to context. Either word, moreover, may refer to different phenomena: a line of transmission, a method of scripture classification, certain rituals and practices, or religious institutions possibly recognized by the government.

In historical reality, and especially in the context of internal alchemy, the entire notion of school is highly problematic. There is often no apparent connection among alleged members aside from some affinity of their practices and theories. People associated with the so-called School of the Middle (*Zhongzong* 中宗), for example, were neither connected to each other as a lineage or as an institution. More often than not, “school” designates a retroactive classification with little or no connection to contemporaneous reality. It is true, as will be shown in the context of Lu Xixing, that certain alchemists formed small communities, often around the cult of Lü Dongbin and the practice of spirit-writing. However, they typically had no connection to any Daoist school or ordination system and tended to receive practice instructions directly from the immortals, then created alchemical scriptures on the basis of spirit-writing records.

In terms of historical unfolding, internal alchemy follows in the wake of external practice, codified under the auspices of Great Clarity (*Taiqing* 太清; see Pregadio 2006b) and the elaborate internal cultivation methods of the school of Highest Clarity (*Shangqing* 上清; see Robinet 2000), both rising in the 4th century and forming the backbone of the Daoist religion (Qing 1996; Kohn 2004; Robinet 1997).

First specialized treatises appeared between the late Tang (618-907) and Five Dynasties (907-960) periods. An early work of great impact was the *Ruyao jing* 入藥鏡 (Mirror on Compounding the Medicine) attributed to Cui Xifan 崔希範 (fl. 880-940), as was the *Wuji tu* 無

極圖 (Diagram of the Non-Ultimate), attributed to the Daoist master Chen Tuan 陳搏 (d. 989) (see Yokote 2014; Zhang 2001).

The first semi-organized school arose in the 11th century, called Zhong-Lü 鍾呂 after its major founders, the legendary immortals Lü Dongbin and Zhongli Quan 鍾離權. Its texts include the *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集 (Collection of the Transmission of the Dao from Zhongli to Lü, DZ 263, chs.14-16; trl. Wong 2000), the *Lingbao bifa* 靈寶畢法 (Conclusive Methods of Numinous Treasure, DZ 1191; trl. Baldrian-Hussein 1984), the *Xishan qunxian huizhen ji* 西山群仙會真記 (Record of the Host of Immortals and Assembled Perfected of the Western Hills, DZ 246; trl. Bertschinger 2018), and various lesser treatises (see Baldrian-Hussein 1984, 48-51).

Well documented since the mid-12th century (Zhang 2001, 83-193), these works describe how practitioners should focus on their viscera, correlate kidneys and heart with yin and yang, replicate the cyclical movements of heaven and earth within the microcosm of their physical bodies, and thereby purify spirit to generate the yang-spirit. No masters are known, and it never formed a formal lineage. Many later alchemists clearly distinguish between the texts and their legendary authors: worshiping the latter, they often criticized and denounced the former (see Eskildsen 2016).

In the mid-11th century, and thus contemporaneous with the rising of Zhong-Lü, Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987?-1082) wrote the key treatise known as *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Chapters on Awakening to Perfection, DZ 141-146), which combines Zhong-Lü methods with the cosmological teachings of the *Cantong qi*.³ In the early 13th century, Zhang was appointed as the first patriarch of the Southern School (Nanzong 南宗) of internal alchemy, followed by Shi Tai 石泰 (d.1158), Xue Daoguang 薛道光 (1078?-1191), Chen Nan 陳楠 (d.1213) and Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194-1229?). However, the real founder of this school is probably Bai Yuchan, who created the lineage *post-facto* and traced it back to Zhang Boduan (see Wang 2019). Bai's methods center on the cultivation of the heart (*xin* 心) and combine internal alchemy with Daoist rituals and Buddhist-style meditations (Gai 2013).

³ *Zhen* 真 may be translated “perfection” (Kohn 1993, 313) or “reality” (Pregadio 2009). Both translations are acceptable, but I prefer the former. Zhang Boduan and other internal alchemists developed cultivation techniques supposed to help practitioners to transform themselves into new, perfect people or immortals. An elaborate, intricate process, it is more than a simple return to “reality.”

Major Schools

In the mid-12th century, Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1113-1170) founded the school of Complete Perfection (*Quanzhen* 全真) (Yao 2000). Merging Buddhist teachings and practices with traditional Daoist ones and internal alchemy, the school is a monastic order, whose members abandon their families, take vows of renunciation, and lead celibate and ascetic lives (Eskildsen 2004; Komjathy 2007). Alchemists usually refer to Wang's followers as the Northern Lineage (Beipai 北派).

The Southern Song (1127-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties saw the emergence of notable alchemists such as Qiu Chuji 丘處機 (1148-1227), Chen Chongsu 陳冲素 (n. d.), Xiao Tingzhi 蕭廷芝 (fl.1260-1264), Yu Yan 俞琰 (1258-1314), Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1289-after 1335) and others. The Yuan alchemist Li Daochun 李道純 (fl.1288-1292) combined internal alchemy with Neo-Confucian through and allegedly founded the School of the Middle (Crowe 2004; Dong et al.2009).

In the early Ming dynasty, the government decided that only two Daoist schools would receive official recognition: Complete Perfection and Celestial Masters (DeBruyn 2000; Qing 1996, 3:384-433). The former consisted of a net of Daoist monasteries, where monks and nuns practiced self-cultivation, while the latter worked through a priesthood that remained among the laity and focused on the performance of rituals. This system of organization of the Daoist community—and the administrative control that came with it—remains intact to the present day (see Lai 2003; Kohn 2018).

Scholars often describe the Ming and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties as a time when internal alchemy declined (Wang Z. et al.2016, 62). The sources, however, do not support this view: internal alchemy flourished during this period. The famous Ming alchemist, Wu Shouyang 伍守陽 (1571-1644) allegedly founded the Wu-Liu school (Wuliu pai 伍柳派) (Esposito 2000). Later, the Buddhist monk Liu Huayang 柳華陽 (b.1736) emerged as its most influential exponent (Ding 2007). Other famous alchemists of the time include Lu Xixing, the subject of this book, as well as the founder of the Western School (Xipai 西派) Li Xiyue 李西月 (1806-1856), Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734-1821), Min Yide 閔一得 (1748-1836) and many others.

Treatises of the period tend to explain internal alchemy in a relatively transparent manner and enjoyed great popularity. Frequently published and reprinted, they contributed to the spread of the practice. Most writings of Lu Xixing appeared in print during his lifetime,

when alchemical cultivation became widespread among various strata of Chinese society: literati, adherents of popular religious movements, Buddhists, as well as ordinary people (Berling 1980; Goossaert 1997; Seiwert 2003).

Internal alchemy has retained its popularity in the modern era. The two most influential alchemists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are Chen Yingning 陳櫻寧, (1880-1969) and Zhao Bichen 趙避塵 (1860-after 1933) (see Despeux 1979; Goossaert 1997; Liu 2009a). Both worked hard to cleanse internal alchemy of so-called superstitions and attempted to conform it to modernity and modern science as they understood it. Since then, internal alchemy has continued to survive today, and certain notable Chinese scholars, such as Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛 and Ge Guolong 戈國龍, are active practitioners.⁴

Sexual Alchemy

Scholars universally consider Lu Xixing a proponent of sexual cultivation. They often divide internal alchemy into two main strands of solo (*duxiu* 獨修) and duo (sexual) cultivation (*shuangxiu* 雙修) (Hudson 2008). The two differ in their approach to working with the basic ingredients of self-transformation. Solo alchemists form an elixir by isolating and assembling subtle aspects of energies within their own body, while sexual practitioners collect it from partners during intercourse. The latter, being socially unacceptable, was and is undertaken in secrecy and in the sources appears as a relatively minor phenomenon. Treatises that supposedly describe it usually consist of vague allegories and outline no specific methods; only a few works written during the late-Ming and early Qing dynasties speak about it as a full-fledged system of cultivation (Hao 1994; Hudson 2008; Liu 2009).

Prior to that, some alchemical treatises can be classified as sexual, describing partner practice for the creation of a yin-elixir (*yindan* 陰丹). For example, the 10th-century *Wangwu zhenren koushou yindan mijue lingpian* 王屋真人口授陰丹秘訣靈篇 (Numinous Chapters on the Secret Formula of the Yin Elixir, Orally Transmitted by the Perfected of Mount Wangwu, DZ 1032, ch. 63) states that, while the yang-elixir (*yangdan* 陽丹) provides ascent to heaven, the yin-elixir brings longevity and health.

⁴ Both are professors at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, leading modern specialists on internal alchemy and the author of numerous relevant books (Hu 1995; 2008; 2009a; 2009b; Ge 2001; 2004).

During the Song dynasty, sexual teachings appeared as part of the commentary tradition on Zhang Boduan's *Wuzhen pian*. One of his alleged inheritors, by the name Liu Yongnian 劉永年 (fl.1138-1168), is considered its founder. Better known and more influential is Liu's disciple Weng Baoguang 翁葆光 (fl.1173), whose commentary survives in several editions (Baldrian-Hussein in Pre-gadio 2008, 1036; Hao 1994, 258). One forms part of the *Wuzhen pian sanzhu* 悟真篇三注 (Three Commentaries on the Chapters on the Awakening to Perfection DZ 142), which also includes works of Lu Shu 陸壑 (n. d.) and Chen Zhixu, presumably both sexual practitioners. While characterized as a lineage within the Southern School, there is no evidence of formal transmissions, specific techniques, or other indications of systematization. On the other hand, sexual allegories also appear in the works of Bai Yuchan and his followers, usually considered proponents of solo cultivation (Gai 2013, 811-816).

The first great writer associated with sexual alchemy is the Yuan alchemist Chen Zhixu (Hudson 2007; 2008; He 2011). In his various works, he describes self-cultivation in a highly abstract manner, focuses on cosmology and profoundly exposes the theory and practice of internal alchemy, but does not provide clear descriptions of sexual techniques. Clarke Hudson reads Chen's treatises on the basis of Ming works, saying, "because the Ming-dynasty texts reveal their details more openly, comparing them with Chen's writing will shed light on the cryptic passages in the latter" (2007, 413).

Sexual alchemy came into its own during the Ming and Qing. A key text is the *Jindan zhenchuan* 金丹真傳 (Perfect Transmission of the Golden Elixir, ZWDS 11, 860-876), compiled by Sun Ruzhong 孫汝忠 (b.1575). A record of the teachings of Sun's father, Sun Jiaoluan 孫教鸞 (1505-1610), and commentaries written by Zhang Chonglie 張崇烈 and Li Kan 李堪 (n. d.), it describes the entire process of self-cultivation, beginning with "establishing the foundation" (*zhuji* 築基) to ascent into heaven, clearly outlining sexual techniques as an integral part of the process.

More methods appear in treatises traditionally attributed to the legendary early-Ming immortal Zhang Sanfeng 張三丰, such as the *Jindan jieyao* 金丹節要 (Summary of the Golden Elixir) and the *Caizhen jiyao* 採真機要 (Secret Principles of Gathering the True Essence), both included in a sexual compendium known as the *Sanfeng danjue* 三丰丹訣 (Alchemical Instructions of [Zhang] Sanfeng, ZWDS 11,322-352) and translated by Douglas Wile (1992, 169-188). Histori-

cally, they appear first in a collection of alchemical scriptures by Fu Jinquan 傅金銓 (1765-1844) (see Valussi 2012; Xie 2005), the *Daoshu shiqi zhong* 道書十七種 (Seventeen Kinds of Books on the Dao), leaving their authorship and provenance open to speculation. Hudson classifies these texts as a separate category, called “alchemical *huanjing bunao* 還精補腦 [reverting essence to nurture the brain]” (2008, 420-24). Their methods and language are somewhat similar to the *Jindan zhenchuan*, supplementing it by presenting more detailed descriptions. Further information is contained in the many other treatises Fu included in his collection. Together with his commentaries and personal treatises, they present a comprehensive outline of sexual alchemy.

Other practitioners who may have engaged in sexual alchemy are Lu Xixing and the members of Li Xiyue’s Western School. They sometimes use notions and terms similar to those found in Sun Ruzhong and Fu Jinquan, but rarely discuss sexual cultivation in a straightforward manner or clearly describe specific techniques. Rather, they focus on transformations inside body and mind and in many ways resemble the works of their Song precursors and Chen Zhixu, all being highly ambiguous.

Huo Kegong argues that Li Xiyue is a sexual alchemist (2008). Li indeed may have practiced some sexual methods. He compiled the *Zhang Sanfeng quanji* 張三丰全集 (Complete Collection of Zhang Sanfeng) and claimed to be a member of the lineage of Sun Jiaoluan and Sun Ruzhong. Li’s works are often written in ambiguous language and could be interpreted sexually, but they do not explicitly discuss sexual techniques or focus on sexual practice. Instead, their key concerns are spirit cultivation and the process of alchemical transformation. When Li comments on the famous poem, *Wugen shu* 無根樹 (Rootless Tree), attributed to Zhang Sanfeng and often considered a classic on sexual alchemy, he writes from the perspective of solo cultivation (Wile 1992, 146-147). Some of his followers in the Western School may well have used sexual techniques, but others ultimately rejected them (Chen and Zhang 2010; Huo 2008, 484-88).

