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ELISIR MERCURIALE E IMMORTALITÀ
CAPITOLI PER UNA STORIA DELL'ALCHIMIA
NELL'ANTICA EURASIA

A cura di

Giacomella Orofino, Amneris Roselli e Antonella Sannino

II.







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DISCRIMINATIONS IN CULTIVATING THE TAO. LIU YIMING (1734-1821) AND HIS XIUZHEN HOUBIAN

FABRIZIO PREGADIO

ABSTRACT

The Daoist master Liu Yiming was an 11th-generation master of one of the northern branches of the Longmen (Dragon Gate) lineage. This article focuses on one of his main works, entitled *Xiuzhen houbian* (Further Discriminations in Cultivating Reality), which provides an overview of his teachings on Daoism and Neidan, or Internal Alchemy. In particular, the article examines three main subjects. The first is the relation between the precelestial and the postcelestial domains (*xiantian* and *houtian*). The second is the view of the human being, which is centered on the concepts of Nature (*xing*) and Existence (*ming*). The third is the function of Neidan, which should provide a way to revert to the precelestial and lead to the realization of both Nature and Existence. In this perspective, Liu Yiming rejects several conventional notions of Neidan, while offering at the same time a doctrinal exposition that is grounded in some of the most deep-rooted aspects of this tradition.

Beyond the variety of outlooks and personal concerns that they reflect, studies published in the past three or four decades have shown that Taoist Internal Alchemy, or Neidan 內丹, is by no means a unitary or uniform tradition. Its sources document doctrines and practices that differ not only according to the degrees of “influence” by diverse legacies (Taoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, cosmology, medicine, and meditational or physiological techniques, to mention a few), but also according to the emphasis that they give on the exposition of doctrinal principles or on the performance of practices, and to the explications provided on the relation between doctrines and practices. While modern studies sometimes neglect to consider the differences among these approaches, in a premodern context such differences were one of the main means of self-identification, so much so that the varying views on these issues have often led to the creation of lineages and branches within the tradition as a whole.

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

¹ By “unique,” I mean that Liu Yiming occupies a distinct place within the Neidan tradition, and



Born in present-day Shanxi province, Liu Yiming was an 11th-generation master of one of the northern branches of the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage.² Having recovered from severe illness in his youth, he undertook extended traveling that led him to meet his two main masters, whom he calls Kangu Laoren 穀谷老人 (Old Man of the Kangu Valley) and Xianliu Zhangren 仙留丈人 (Great Man Who Rests in Immortality). In 1779, he visited the Qiyun 棲雲 mountains, in present-day Gansu, and decided to settle there. He devoted the second half of his life to teaching and writing. His works mainly consist of writings on Internal Alchemy and of commentaries on its major scriptures. Most of them are found in a collection entitled *Daoshu shi'er zhong* 道書十二種 (Twelve Books on the Tao), which was edited and published by his disciples. In addition, he wrote little-known commentaries on Taoist and Buddhist texts, as well as works on ophthalmology, a subject that he studied in his youth.

This article focuses on one of the “twelve books” included in the *Daoshu shi'er zhong*, entitled *Xiuzhen houbian* 修真後辨 or *Further Discriminations in Cultivating Reality*. As shown by its title, Liu Yiming meant this work to be a continuation of the *Xiuzhen biannan* 修真辨難 or *Discriminations on Difficult Points in Cultivating Reality*, written in 1798 and framed as a sequence of questions and answers – about 120 altogether – between him and a disciple. The *Houbian* bears no date, but was probably completed shortly after the *Biannan*. It takes up most of the subjects discussed in the earlier work, but arranges them as a series of 26 short essays, each of which is devoted to a particular subject relevant to Internal Alchemy.

Few other Chinese masters have illustrated the relation between Taoism and Internal Alchemy as clearly as Liu Yiming does in this work. Grafting Internal Alchemy onto the teachings of the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue) and of the later Taoist tradition, he shows how the way of the Golden Elixir can lead to the highest state of realization according to the Taoist principles. In this essay, I will attempt to present the main points of Liu Yiming’s teaching as found in the *Xiuzhen houbian*, referred to below as *Discriminations*.³

not that he is the only representative of these views. There is, for example, a clear continuity between his views and those of Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194–1229?) and Li Daochun 李道純 (late 13th century), and to some extent those of Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290-ca. 1368), despite the different ways in which each of them has formulated his teachings. It may be not a chance that the works of all these four masters include not only texts on Neidan, but also commentaries on the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue).

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

³ References to the *Xiuzhen houbian* and to other works by Liu Yiming quoted in the present article are to the 1880 Yihua tang 翼化堂 edition, reprinted in *Daoshu shi'er zhong* (Twelve Books on the Tao; Beijing: Zhongguo Zhonggyiyao chubanshe, 1990) with parts of the 1819 Huguo an 護國庵 edition. This book in turn is entirely reprinted in *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書 (Taoist Texts Outside the Canon), vol. 8. A complete translation of the *Xiuzhen houbian* is found in LIU YIMING 2013. Passages quoted in the present article are drawn from this translation and include references to its numbering of chapters, but I do not provide references to page numbers.



THE MEANING OF “DISCRIMINATIONS”

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

莊子謂大道不稱，大辯不言。

Zhuangzi says: “The Great Tao is not discussed, the great discriminations are not spoken.”⁴ (*Discriminations*, “Preface” 序, 1a).

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

此予不得不強辨，以破其稱之不真；不得不細辨，以劈其言之有假。

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

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

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

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

His answer to these questions is exemplary:

誰真誰不真，誰假誰不假，是在不稱道、不言道者見而自知之，吾烏乎辨？

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

On the one hand, therefore, one should respond to the false, but on the other hand, true and false in discussions and speeches about the Tao may seem to be

⁴ The quotation derives from *Zhuangzi*, ch. 2; see WATSON 1968: 44.



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

PRECELESTIAL AND POSTCELESTIAL DOMAINS

The first distinction made in *Discriminations* concerns the “precelestial” (*xiantian* 先天) and the “postcelestial” (*houtian* 後天) domains; this distinction is essential to understand the whole of Liu Yiming’s discourse on Taoism and Internal Alchemy.⁵ The precelestial is the domain prior to the generation of the cosmos. The Tao does not manifest itself in this state, which can only be described by the name of the principle to which it pertains, Non-Being (*wu* 無). The postcelestial domain, instead, pertains to the principle of Being (*you* 有). This is the domain in which the individual creatures, objects, and phenomena live, exist, and occur; each of them is one of the “ten thousand things,” the innumerable transient forms generated by the formless Tao.

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

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

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

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

The words “vague and indistinct,” “dim and obscure,” and “Being and Non-Being”

⁵ *Xiantian* and *houtian* are often translated as Earlier Heaven and Later Heaven, or in similar ways. They refer, in fact, to the Opening of Heaven (*kaitian* 開天), the actual “instant” in which the cosmos is generated.



show that the three medicines are something not provided with form.⁶ (*Discriminations*, ch. 1, “Precelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit” 先天精氣神, 2a).

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

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

They have three names, but in fact they are one. “One” refers to the inchoate Origin, “three” refers to the subdivision of the Numen.⁷ “One” is the foundation (*ti*), “three” is the operation (*yong*) They are three but it is one; it is one but they are three. When we speak of the three superior Medicines, we mean the operation; when we speak of its being plentiful and whole, we mean the foundation. It cannot be called “three,” but they cannot be called “one” either. (Id., 1b).

The operation of Original Essence, Breath, and Spirit results in the generation of the postcelestial state, which encompasses the whole cosmos including the human beings: “Through them, what is devoid of form generates form, and what is devoid of substance generates substance.”⁸ The different aspects taken on by Essence, Breath, and Spirit in the postcelestial domain are mentioned in a famous poem attributed to Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194-1229?), which Liu Yiming quotes at the beginning of the first chapter of *Discriminations*:

其精不是交感精，乃是玉皇口中涎；其氣即非呼吸氣，乃知卻是太素烟；其神即非思慮神，可與元始相比肩。

This Essence is not the essence of the intercourse:
it is the saliva in the mouth of the Jade Sovereign.
This Breath is not the breath of inspiration and expiration:
know that it is the haze of Great Purity.
This Spirit is not the thinking spirit:
it can stand alongside the Original Commencement.⁹

In the human being, Original Essence manifests itself mainly as semen (the “essence of the intercourse,” *jiaogan jing* 交感精) in males and menstrual blood in fe-

⁶ The verses “Vague and indistinct! Dim and obscure!” derive from *Daode jing*, sec. 21, which says of the Tao: “Vague and indistinct! Within there is something. Dim and obscure! Within there is an essence.” The verses “Watching, you do not see them; listening, you do not hear them” are not found in the current versions of the *Xinyin jing*; they come from *Daode jing*, sec. 14: “Watching, you do not see it; listening, you do not hear it; grasping, you do not get it.” The verse “From Non-Being they embrace Being” (*cong wu shou you* 從無守有) reads “They preserve Non-Being and embrace Being” (*cun wu show you* 存無守有) in the current versions of the *Xinyin jing*.

⁷ In Taoist texts, “subdivision of the Numen” (*fengling* 分靈) indicates the partitioning of original Unity that occurs as the cosmos is generated. In this case, the partitioning of Unity results in the emergence of Essence, Breath, and Spirit.

⁸ *Discriminations*, ch. 1, “Precelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit,” 1a.

⁹ *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 (Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality; *Daozang* 道藏 ed.), 39.10a.



males; Original Breath manifests itself as the ordinary breath of inspiration and expiration (*huxi* 呼吸); and Original Spirit manifests itself as the cognitive spirit (*shishen* 識神, or “thinking spirit,” *silü shen* 思慮神), that is, the thinking mind. The precelestial state is Yang, while the postcelestial state is Yin.¹⁰ The shift from one to the other state is seen as inevitable: reiterating the general Chinese view on this subject, Liu Yiming repeatedly states that “when the Yang culminates, the Yin is born.”¹¹ The precelestial state, however, is not permanently erased but is only concealed within the postcelestial; some persons have an inherent capacity to preserve it, while others need to seek it after it withdraws. As we shall see, these points bear important consequences on Liu Yiming’s teachings on Internal Alchemy.

Above the precelestial and postcelestial domains, Liu Yiming places the Precelestial Breath of True Unity (*xiantian zhengyi zhi qi* 先天真一之氣). This state is beyond definition or description, and can be referred to only by negative statements:

非後天呼吸氣、思慮神、交感精可比，亦非元精元氣元神可同。

It cannot be compared to the postcelestial breath of inspiration and expiration, the thinking spirit, and the essence of the intercourse; and it also cannot be equated to the Original Essence, the Original Breath, and the Original Spirit. (*Discriminations*, ch. 3, “Precelestial Breath of True Unity” 先天真一之氣, 4a).

The Precelestial Breath of True Unity is what generates Essence, Breath, and Spirit in both their precelestial and postcelestial aspects:

… 先天真一之氣，歷萬劫而不壞，超群類而獨尊，生死不拘，有無不立，為後天精氣神之根本，為先天精氣神之主宰，乃至陽之物，天上之寶，人罕識之。

… the precelestial Breath of True Unity is indestructible for ten thousand kalpas, transcends all things, and is “the only Honored One.”¹² Neither life nor death adhere to it, neither Being nor Non-Being are established in it. This Breath is the root of the postcelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit, and the ruler of the precelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit. It is something of the nature of utmost Yang, the Treasure of Heaven. Those who comprehend it are few. (Id., 4a).

With regard to the human being, moreover, the Precelestial Breath of True Unity cannot be located in, or equated with, any of its physical or mental features:

蓋此物不在內，不在外，不落五蘊八識，不在五臟六腑，不在六根門頭，不在百骨穴竅，而在乎玄關一竅。

Essentially, this is something that is neither inside nor outside; it does not sink into the five aggregates and the eight consciousnesses; it is not in the five viscera and the six

¹⁰ “Original Essence, Original Breath, and Original Spirit are Yang in the postcelestial, but are Yin in the precelestial.” *Discriminations*, ch. 3, “Precelestial Breath of True Unity” 先天真一之氣, 4a.

¹¹ See, for instance, *Discriminations*, ch. 2, “Postcelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit” 後天精氣神, 3a. The same concept is stated in ch. 3, 8, 13, 14, 15, and 19.

¹² According to tradition, the Buddha at his birth pointed with one hand to Heaven and with the other hand to the Earth, and said: “In Heaven above, on the Earth below, I am the only Honored one.”



receptacles; it is not in the six sense organs and the gatekeeper; and it is not in the hundred bones and the cavities and the openings of the body. It is in the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier.¹³ (Id., 4b).

The only “place” in which the Precelestial Breath of True Unity is to be found is actually devoid of location: the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier, on which we shall return presently. In alchemical terms, as Liu Yiming says, the Precelestial Breath of True Unity is the Golden Elixir.¹⁴ The Elixir, therefore, consists in the conjunction of the precelestial and the postcelestial states, and grants access to the highest state of non-duality, or True Unity.

THE HUMAN BEING

Liu Yiming’s view of the human being is complex and can only be gleaned through statements found in different chapters of his *Discriminations*. It revolves, however, the main concepts outlined below.

The One Opening

The One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier (*xuanguan yiqiao* 玄關一竅) is the non-spatial center of the human being. Liu Yiming describes its features in Chapter 16 of *Discriminations*, where he lists some of its alternative names – including three derived from the *Daode jing*, namely Gate of the Mysterious-Female (*xuanpin men* 玄牝門), Gate of All Marvels (*zhongmiao men* 獨妙門), and Mansion of the Inaudible and the Invisible (*xiyifu* 希夷府).¹⁵ Like Mysterious-Female, several other terms used in these names (for example, Dragon and Tiger, Turtle and Snake, *wu* 戌 and *ji* 巳) allude to the conjunction of the opposites:¹⁶

¹³ The five aggregates (*wuyun* 五蘊), or *skandha*, are form, sensation, perception, mental impulse, and consciousness. The eight consciousnesses (*bashi* 八識) are those of the five senses, the mind, the self-consciousness (*manas*), and the “storehouse-consciousness” (*ālāya-vij-āna*). The five viscera (*wuzang* 五臟) are the heart, the liver, the spleen, the lungs, and the kidneys. The six receptacles (*liufu* 六腑) are the stomach, the gallbladder, the Triple Burner (*sanjiao* 三焦), the urinary bladder, and the large and the small intestines. The six sense organs (*liugen* 六根) are the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the mouth, and the mind. “Gatekeeper” (*mentou* 門頭) is another term for consciousness. (“Triple Burner” has multiple meanings. It usually refers to three loci, devoid of material counterparts, found between the thorax and the abdomen. This term, however, is also a synonym of Gate of Life or *mingmen* 命門, another immaterial locus found between the kidneys.)

¹⁴ *Discriminations*, ch. 3, “Precelestial Breath of True Unity,” 4a.

¹⁵ *Daode jing*, sec. 6: “The gate of the Mysterious-Female is called the root of Heaven and Earth”; sec. 1: “Mystery and then again mystery, gate of all marvels”; and sec. 14: “Watching, you do not see it: it is called invisible; listening, you do not hear it: it is called inaudible.” *Xuanpin* 玄牝 is often translated as “mysterious female,” where “mysterious” is meant as an adjective of “female.” It is made, however, of two juxtaposed terms: “mysterious” (*xuan* 玄, a property of Heaven) refers to the Yang, and “female” (*pin* 牝) refers to the Yin. In other words, Mysterious-Female means the conjunction of Yin and Yang.

¹⁶ *Wu* 戌 and *ji* 巳 are two emblems (belonging to the series of the ten celestial stems, *tiangan* 天干) that represent the Yang and the Yin aspects of Unity, respectively.



… 古人不敢筆之於書，而又不敢秘而不言。喻之曰生殺舍、玄牝門、龍虎壇、龜蛇竅、戊己門、生死關、刑德門、陰陽戶、眾妙門、希夷府、仙佛地、性命竅、元神室、虛無穴、威音國、等等異名，無非明此一竅。

… the ancients dare not describe it in writing, but they also dare not keep it secret and be silent about it. They spoke about it by means of metaphors, such as Dwelling of Giving and Taking Life; Gate of the Mysterious-Female; Altar of the Dragon and the Tiger; Opening of the Turtle and the Snake; Gate of *wu* and *ji*; Barrier of Birth and Death; Gate of Punishment and Virtue; Door of Yin and Yang; Gate of All Marvels; Mansion of the Inaudible and the Invisible; Land of the Immortals and the Buddhas; Opening of Nature (*xing*) and Existence (*ming*); Chamber of the Original Spirit; Cavity of Empty Non-Being; and Country of the Majestic Voice Kings. It has many different names, all of which illustrate this One Opening.¹⁷ (*Discriminations*, ch. 16, “The One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier” 玄關一竅, 26a-b)

Liu Yiming also devotes a poem to the One Opening, where he represents it as a place that is “not round and not square,” inhabited by a True Man (*zhenren* 真人, a realized person) who “eats a broth of millet” (Grain of Millet, *shumi* 穀米, is a common synonym of the Elixir)¹⁸ and “drinks the liquor of the boundless” (*hongmeng* 鴻蒙, an allusion to the inchoate state prior to the birth of the cosmos). The name of this immortal is Spirit of the Valley (*Gushen* 谷神), another term derived from the *Daode jing*. Since Spirit of the Valley is another name of the Mysterious-Female, this is immortal is the One Opening itself.¹⁹

悟元子今不惜兩片皮，重為祖師傳神寫影，發其所未發，泄其所未泄，以神會之，以意契之，而告同人曰：此竅樣如蓬壺，外小而內大，深不可測；非圓非方，黑白相符，幽明相通；其門高五丈，闊四尺，有門兩扇，一開一闔，左有青龍蟠，右有白虎卧，上有朱雀飛，下有烏龜伏；恍兮惚兮，杳兮冥兮，其中有真人居焉，名曰谷神，號曰長生壽者；日食黍米粥，夜飲鴻蒙酒，有時唱清平，有時緊閉口，一呼則竅門開，一吸則竅門閉。

Now I will not hesitate to speak, and I will give a true reflection of the spirit of our ancestral masters, bringing forth what they did not bring forth and disclosing what they did not disclose. Joining them by means of my Spirit, being one with them by means of my Intention, I say to my companions:

This Opening has a shape similar to Penglai:²⁰
outside it is small, inside it is large,

¹⁷ The Majestic Voice Kings (Weiyin wang 威音王) are a series of Buddhas who lived in a primordial kalpa.

¹⁸ This simile is drawn from the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (The Seal of the Unity of the Three), 79:20, which says of the Elixir: “Ingest it in pills sized as a grain of millet”; PREGADIO 2011: 118. The same metaphor is used in a large number of Taoist texts, which mention a “sacred pearl” (*baozhu* 寶珠) that is “sized as a grain of millet.”

¹⁹ *Daode jing*, sec. 6: “The Spirit of the Valley never dies: it is called the Mysterious-Female.”

²⁰ Penglai is the so-called “island of the immortals,” in the Eastern Sea. The simile between Penglai, also known as Penghu 蓬壺, and the “place” where the Elixir is compounded is also found in the *Zhouyi cantong qi*, 25:1-4: “On its sides are ramparts and portals, and in shape it resembles Penghu”; PREGADIO 2011: 80.



and its depth cannot be fathomed.
It is not round and it is not square;
within it, “the black and the white tally with each other,”²¹
and darkness and light pervade one another.
Its gate is fifty feet high and four feet wide,
and has two panels:
once they open, once they close.
On its left coils a green dragon,
on its right is couched a white tiger,
above flies a vermilion sparrow,
below rests a black turtle.
Vague and indistinct! Dim and obscure!²²
A True Man lives inside it:
his name is Spirit of the Valley,
his appellation is Living a Long Life.
At daytime, he eats a broth of millet;
at night, he drinks the liquor of the boundless.
Sometimes he sings, clear and peaceful;
sometimes he is motionless and keeps his mouth closed.
When he exhales, the gate of the Opening is wide open,
when he inhales, the gate of the Opening is firmly shut. (Id., 26b-27a).

Although one is bound to describe it as a “place,” Liu Yiming points out that the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier is devoid of dimension and is to be found “neither inside nor outside” the body. Here Liu Yiming gives an example of the “discriminations” that he sets forth in this work. Different Taoist traditions have identified the One Opening with one or another part of the body, as he reminds in this passage:

後世學人。不遇真師。或認口鼻。或認眉間。或認囟門。或認百會。或認咽喉。或認夾脊。或認尾閻。或認心竅。或認黃庭。或認丹田。關元氣海。

Among the students of the later generations who have not encountered a true master, some have thought that this Opening is the mouth and the nose; some that it is the point between the eyebrows; some that it is the fontanel; some that it is the cavity of the Hundred Convergences; some that it is the throat; some that it is the Spinal Handle; some that it is the Caudal Funnel; some that it is the opening of the heart; some that it is the Yellow Court; and some that it is the Cinnabar Field, the Origin of the Barrier, or the Ocean of Breath.²³ (Id., 25b-26a).

²¹ This phrase also is drawn from the *Zhouyi cantong qi*, 56:2; PREGADIO 2011: 102.

²² See note 6 above.

²³ The cavity of the Hundred Convergences (*baihui xue* 百會穴) is in the sinciput. The Spinal Handle (*jiaji* 夾脊) is a point in the back of the body, across from the heart. The Caudal Funnel (*weiliu* 尾閻) is located in the lowest section of the spine. Yellow Court (*huangting* 黃庭) is one of the terms that denote the center of the body; when the reference framework is the five viscera, it refers to the spleen; when it is the three Cinnabar Fields, Yellow Court may denote any of them, including the central one, which corresponds to the heart. Origin of the Barrier (*guanyuan* 關元) is usually a name of the



Liu Yiming, instead, concurs with earlier masters of Internal Alchemy in saying that the center of the human being pertains neither to the body nor to the mind. Li Daochun 李道純 (late 13th century), in particular, wrote:

但著在形體上，都不是。亦不可離此一身，向外尋求。諸丹經皆不言正在何處者何也。難形筆舌，亦說不得，故曰玄關。所以聖人只書一中字示人，此中字玄關明矣。所謂中者，非中外之中，亦非四維上下之中，不是在中之中。

If the Mysterious Barrier is situated in the physical body, it is entirely wrong; yet, it cannot be separated from the person and cannot be searched outside it. Why does no scripture on the Elixir say where it is found? Because it is something hardly possible to express in writing or speaking, and this is why it is called Mysterious Barrier. Therefore the sages showed it only by writing the graph 中 (*zhong*, “center”), since this graph illustrates the Mysterious Barrier. This Center is not the center of “internal and external”; it is not “the center of the four directions and above and below”; and it is not the center that is “within.”²⁴

Similarly, Liu Yiming asks: “The Mysterious Barrier has no form and no image: how could it have a position? It is not form and it is not emptiness: how could it have a place?”²⁵ He adds:

乃生天生地生人之孔竅，成聖成佛成仙之家鄉。安爐立鼎在此，採藥烹煉在此，結丹在此，脫丹在此，有為在此，無為在此，始終功用總在此。

This is the opening that generates Heaven, Earth, and humans; this is the hometown of Saints, Buddhas, and Immortals. You arrange the furnace and set up the tripod here; you collect the Medicine and refine it here; you coagulate the Elixir here; and you deliver it here. Being is here, Non-Being is here. The beginning and the end of all operation are here. (Id., 27a).

The whole alchemical work, therefore, occurs in the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier.

“My House” and the “Other House”

The One Opening harbors the True Yang (*zhenyang* 真陽), which is synonymous with the Precelestial Breath of True Unity and which Liu Yiming, as we have seen above, also calls the “treasure of Heaven.”²⁶ With the shift from the precelestial to the postcelestial, the True Yang withdraws, and the recognition of the spaceless center is lost. Liu Yiming uses the terms “my house” (*wojia* 我家) and “other

navel. Ocean of Breath (*qihai* 氣海) is usually a name of the lower Cinnabar Field (*dantian* 丹田), but can also denote the kidneys.

²⁴ *Zhonghe ji* 中和集 (Central Harmony: An Anthology; Daozang ed.), 3.17a-b.

²⁵ *Discriminations*, ch. 16, “The One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier,” 26a.

²⁶ Under this aspect, True Yang is often called Pure Yang (*chunyang* 純陽). Pure Yang is not the Yang complementary to the Yin after the subdivision of the One into the two, but denotes the stage of Unity prior to the emergence of Yin and Yang.



house” (*tajia* 他家) to refer to the split that occurs at this crucial junction. To introduce this subject, he quotes verses from two poems of the *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Awakening to Reality), a text placed at the origins of several Neidan traditions: 休施巧偽為功力，認取他家不死方。

Desist from exerting your skill in crafty pursuits,
and discern the method of not dying of the other house.²⁷

此般至寶家家有，自是愚人識不全。

This perfect Treasure is in every house –
it is only that the foolish people do not recognize it.²⁸

Liu Yiming opens his “discriminations” on this subject by severely criticizing the view that the term “other house” refers to sexual practices. In this view, the “other house” is the female body, which is Yin and therefore harbors the True Yang principle. Accordingly, those who held this view intended to collect the True Yang through sexual (*yinyang* 陰陽) practices, couched in alchemical language and deemed to reproduce the same processes that occur in the “pure cultivation” (*qingxiu* 清修) methods. About these practices Liu Yiming says:

此皆指示先天藥生之處。後人不知古人秘諦，見他家家家字句，或猜為女子，流於閨丹之術，忍心污行，作孽百端，入於禽獸之域者不可枚舉。彼烏知先天之氣從虛無中來者，安可於有形有象中求之乎？

People in later times have not understood the secret truths of the ancients. When they see the words “other house” and “every house,” they imagine that they refer to women, and fall into the techniques of the “female elixir” (*guidan*).²⁹ They commit themselves to filthy practices and create damages of all kinds. People like these, who enter the animal realm, could not be enumerated. How could they know that, since the precelestial Breath comes from Empty Non-Being, it cannot be sought in what has a form and an image? (*Discriminations*, ch. 13, “*Tajia wojia*” 他家我家, 19a-b).

For Liu Yiming, instead, the terms “my house” and “other house” should be understood with regard to the shift from the precelestial to the postcelestial. With this shift, the precelestial True Yang principle (called precelestial Breath, *xiantian zhi qi* 先天之氣, in the passage quoted above), which is originally possessed by each human being, becomes concealed within the postcelestial Yin principle, to which the world as a whole pertains. Liu Yiming illustrates this shift using the emblems of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes). Here True Yang is represented by Qian ☰. As Qian joins with Kun ☷ (True Yin) to generate the postcelestial state, Qian becomes Li ☷ and Kun becomes Kan ☷. The essence of True Yang is the solid Yang line now found within the two external Yin lines of Kan.

²⁷ *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality), “Jueju,” poem 48; see CLEARY 1987: 107.

²⁸ *Wuzhen pian*, “Jueju,” poem 7; see CLEARY 1987: 65.

²⁹ In Liu Yiming’s usage, *guidan* 閨丹 designates in general the sexual practices that purport to reproduce alchemical process, and in particular the “collection” of the True Yang principle through sexual conjunction.



乾宮之陽走於坤宮，於是乾虛為離，坤實成坎。……陽陷於陰，不屬於我，故曰他家。

The Yang in the Palace of Qian ☰ (True Yang) moves to the Palace of Kun ☷ (True Yin). At that time, Qian becomes empty and turns into Li ☷, and Kun becomes full and forms Kan ☷ When the Yang is trapped within the Yin, it does not belong anymore to “me.” This is why we speak of the “other house.” (Id., 19b).

In other words, the “other house” is the postcelestial domain as a whole, which is ruled by the Yin principle and conceals one’s own precelestial True Yang:

曰我家者，我之真陽離去，所以離為我；曰他家者，我之真陽為陰所陷，所以坎為彼。因有坎離之分，故有他我之名。他我之名是就陽未復來言之耳。果若陽復，則他即是我，我即是他也，只是一個，無有兩樣。

When we speak of “my house,” we mean that one’s own True Yang has separated from oneself; therefore Li ☷ represents “me.” When we speak of the “other house,” we mean that one’s own True Yang has been trapped by the Yin; therefore Kan ☷ represents “the other.” The names “other” and “me” are owed to the separation between Kan and Li, and these names are used until the Yang returns. When it returns, what is “other” becomes the same as “me,” and what is “me” becomes the same as the “other.” They are just one, and they are not two. (Id., 20a).

In the language of alchemy, True Yang is the True Lead found within “black lead” (*heiqian* 黑鉛, the emblem of postcelestial Yin). It should be recovered and joined to True Yin, which is the True Mercury found within native cinnabar (the emblem of postcelestial Yang). The four trigrams mentioned above provide a clear representation of the same process. When it is illustrated through those emblems, the purpose of alchemy consists in regaining the Yang within Kan ☷ (the “other house”) and in using it to replace the Yin within Li ☷ (“my house”). This allows Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ first to be reconstituted, and then to be newly conjoined with one another.

Nature and Existence

Liu Yiming uses the terms “my house” and “other house” also to describe the main poles of one’s life: Nature (*xing* 性) and Existence (*ming* 命). “Nature” is intended as one’s authentic, inner Nature, which is innately perfected; being clear and quiescent of its own, it pertains to the Yin principle. “Existence” refers to one’s life as an individual being; being related to and involved in the continuous movement and change in the outer world, it pertains to the Yang principle. As Liu Yiming says in *Discriminations*, the True Yang principle now found in the “other house” should be recovered in order to stabilize one’s Existence. Then one should look for the True Yin found in “one’s house,” and release it from confinement within the false Yang (the thinking mind) in order to reveal one’s true Nature:

命屬他家，性屬我家。先求他家不死之方以立命，後求我家原有之物以了性。身心不二，性命一家，而性命俱了。



Existence pertains to the “other house,” and Nature pertains to “my house.” First you should search for the “method of not dying of the other house”³⁰ in order to establish your Existence. Then you should search for that thing originally possessed by “my house” in order to fulfill your Nature. When there is no dualism between body and mind, Nature and Existence become one family and are both fulfilled. (*Discriminations*, ch. 5, “Zhenjia xingming” 真假性命, 8b).

The doctrines concerning Nature and Existence are deemed to be fundamental by Liu Yiming and by the authors of many earlier or later Neidan texts. Earlier masters, for instance, called Nature and Existence “the root and foundation of self-cultivation” (*xiuxing zhi genben* 修行之根本),³¹ “the secret of the Golden Elixir” (*jindan zhi bi* 金丹之祕),³² “the essential for refining the Elixir” (*liandan zhi yao* 鍊丹之要),³³ and “the learning of the divine immortals” (*shenxian zhi xue* 神仙之學).³⁴ Liu Yiming himself writes in another work: “The Way of the Golden Elixir is the Way of cultivating Nature and Existence.”³⁵

In *Discriminations*, Liu Yiming gives an important explanation of the respective properties of Nature and Existence. The shift from the precelestial to the postcelestial, he says, involves that both Nature and Existence take on two aspects:

特以性有天賦之性，有氣質之性；命有天數之命，有道氣之命。天賦之性，良知良能，具眾理而應萬事者也；氣質之性，賢愚智不肖，秉氣清濁、邪正不等者也。天數之命，夭壽窮通、富貴困亨、長短不一者也；道氣之命，剛健純粹，齊一生死，永劫長存，天地不違，陰陽不拘者也。

The main point concerning Nature is that there are a Nature consisting in what is bestowed by Heaven, and a Nature consisting in one’s character.³⁶ Concerning Existence, there are an Existence consisting in the destiny given by Heaven, and an Existence consisting in the Breath of the Tao (*daoli*).

³⁰ This expression derives from the *Wuzhen pian* poem quoted in the previous section.

³¹ “Nature and Existence are the root and foundation of self-cultivation.” Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1113-70), attr., *Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun* 重陽立教十五論 (Fifteen Essays by Wang Chongyang to Establish the Teaching; Daozang ed.), 4b.

³² “The secret of the Golden Elixir consists only in Nature and Existence.” Qiu Chuji 邱處機 (1148-1227), attr., *Dadan zhizhi* 大丹直指 (Straightforward Directions on the Great Elixir; Daozang ed.), 2.10b.

³³ “The essential for refining the Elixir consists only in the words Nature and Existence. Anything separate from Nature and Existence is a side gate.” Li Daochun, *Zhonghe ji* (Central Harmony: An Anthology; Daozang ed.), 3.30a. The “side gates” (*pangmen* 旁門) are teachings and practices that, in the view of Li Daochun and many other Neidan masters, do not grant complete realization.

³⁴ “The learning of the divine immortals consists in nothing but cultivating and refining Nature and Existence.” Wang Jie 王玠 (14th c.), *Ruyao jing zhujie* 入藥鏡注解 (Commentary on the Mirror for Compounding the Medicine; Daozang ed.), Preface. See WANG JIE 2013: 3.

³⁵ *Wuzhen zhizhi* 悅真直指 (Straightforward Directions on the Awakening to Reality), 2.40a (commentary on “Jueju,” poem no. 42); see CLEARY 1987: 101, where Nature is translated as “essence,” and Existence as “life.”

³⁶ *Qizhi* 氣質 can also be translated as “personality, temperament, disposition.”



The Nature that is bestowed by Heaven is innate knowledge and innate capacity.³⁷ It is what “possesses all principles and responds to the ten thousand pursuits.”³⁸

The Nature that is one’s character can be worthy or foolish, wise or inept. The endowed breath (*qi*) differs in purity and impurity, in goodness or badness.

The Existence that is the destiny given by Heaven can last a short or a long time, and can meet exhaustion or can flow without hindrances. Wealth and honor, hardship or prosperity differ in range and are dissimilar.

The Existence that is the Breath of the Tao is firm and strong, pure and flawless; it takes life and death as equal, and grows and preserves itself for numberless kalpas. Heaven and Earth do not go against it, and Yin and Yang do not adhere to it. (Id., 8b).

Then Liu Yiming adds:

天賦之性為真，氣質之性為假；道氣之命為真，天數之命為假。真者先天之物，假者後天之物。

The Nature that is bestowed by Heaven is true, and the Nature that is one’s character is false. The Existence that is the Breath of the Tao is true, and the Existence that is the destiny given by Heaven is false. What is true is the precelestial, what is false is the postcelestial. (Id., 8b).

With “true” Existence, Liu Yiming means that each individual is given life by the One Breath (*yiqi* 一氣) of the Tao, the constant and unchanging state of Unity through which the Tao manifests itself and generates transient and changing forms. Within this broad framework, each individual is nothing but an ephemeral form created by the One Breath; however, just like any other entity of phenomenon, it is supposed to perform its own function as part and parcel of existence as a whole. This is one’s “true destiny,” different from the ordinary concept of destiny as a passively acquired or endured sequence of events that make up one’s life. According to Liu Yiming, “true destiny” has nothing to do with long or short lifespans, and with “wealth and honor, hardship or prosperity”; as he says elsewhere, it consists instead in “attaining the precelestial Breath of True Unity.”³⁹

Just like one’s true Nature can be hidden by one’s false personality, so can one’s true Existence (or “true destiny”) become concealed by “following the course” (*shun* 順) of life. Internal Alchemy, says Liu Yiming, allows one to transform one’s false personality and reveal one’s true Nature, and to change one’s false “destiny” and reveal one’s true place in Existence:

³⁷ The terms “innate knowledge” (*liangzhi* 良知) and “innate capacity” (*liangneng* 良能) derive from *Mengzi* 孟子, 7A:15: “What one is able to do without learning is called innate capacity; what one knows without pondering is called innate knowledge.” See LEGGE 1895: 456.

³⁸ This sentence is drawn from Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) commentary on *Mengzi*, 7A:1.

³⁹ *Xiuzhen biannan*, 30b-31a. This statement is found in a discussion about Confucius’ disciple, Yan Hui 颜回, who was intellectually bright and morally flawless, but died at a young age. Liu Yiming adds: “Fulfilling or not fulfilling one’s Existence is distinguished according to the principles of the Tao, and is not to be investigated on the basis of the illusory body One who is not attached to this illusory body can die any time.”



修道者若知修天賦之性，以化氣質之性；修道氣之命，以轉天數之命，性命之道得矣。

If those who cultivate the Tao know how to cultivate the Nature that is bestowed by Heaven, they can use it to transform the Nature that is one's character. If they know how to cultivate the Existence that is the Breath of the Tao, they can use it to change the course of the Existence that is the destiny given by Heaven. When they do that, they realize the Way of Nature and Existence. (Id., 8a).

With its gradual process, therefore, Internal Alchemy provides a means for “inverting the course” (*ni 逆*), making it possible first to “return to one's destiny” (*fuming 復命*) and then to “see one's Nature” (*jianxing 見性*).

Body and Mind

Chapter 4 of *Discriminations* opens by saying:

今人皆曰身心，只知幻化之身心，而不知真正之身心。

People nowadays speak of the body and the mind, but they only know the illusory body and mind, and do not know the true body and mind. (*Discriminations*, ch. 4, “True and False Body and Mind” 真假身心, 6a).

In Liu Yiming's view, the illusory body (*huanhua zhi shen 幻化之身*) is “the body of flesh,” and the illusory mind (*huanhua zhi xin 幻化之心*) is the mind that produces attachment and similar psychological phenomena. Sensorial functions and mental activity derive from the illusory body, while passions and other defilements derive from the illusory mind:

幻化之身，肉身也；幻化之心，人心也。眼耳鼻舌口意，俱幻身之所出；喜怒哀樂愛惡欲，皆人心之所出。六根門頭，樣樣足以喪生；七情妄念，件件能以致死。

The illusory body is the body of flesh; the illusory mind is the human mind. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, mouth, and intellect all come forth from the illusory body; pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire all come forth from the human mind.⁴⁰ Each of the six senses as well as the gatekeeper is sufficient on its own to take your life;⁴¹ each of the seven emotions and each errant thought is capable on its own of giving you death. (Id., 6a-b).

The authentic counterparts of the illusory mind and body are the “celestial mind,” or *tianxin 天心*, and the “dharma-body,” or *fashen 法身*. The celestial mind is the foundation of one's true Nature. Liu Yiming describes it as follows:

此天心不垢不淨，至虛至靈，寂然不動，感而遂通。以言其靜，則無聲無臭；以言其動，

⁴⁰ Although Liu Yiming refers to the six senses (*liugen 六根*) in the next sentence, the list he gives here does not fully correspond to the ordinary Buddhist list of the senses, as he replaces the “body” (the organ of touch) with the mouth. By the mouth, Liu Yiming intends the organ of speech. Pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire are the seven emotions (*qiqing 七情*).

⁴¹ As remarked above, the “gatekeeper” (*mentou*) is consciousness.



則至神至妙；以言其形象，如偃月，如仰盂，如黍珠。不色不空，即色即空，不有不無，即有即無，是性之所寄也。

This celestial mind is neither dirty nor clean; it is utterly empty and utterly luminous, silent and unmoving, and pervades throughout by responding to impulses. In its quiescence, it is soundless and scentless; in its movement, it is utterly spiritual and utterly wondrous; in its form and its image, it is like the crescent moon, an upward-facing basin, and the Pearl of Millet.⁴² It is neither form nor emptiness, and yet it is both form and emptiness; it is neither Being and nor Non-Being, and yet it is both Being and Non-Being. This is what your Nature depends on. (Id., 7a).

The dharma-body, a term that in Buddhism means the unmanifested “body” of the Buddha, is the foundation of one’s true Existence. Liu Yiming writes:

夫此法身，上柱天，下柱地，無頭無尾，無背無面，中立不倚。以言其剛，則粉碎虛空；以言其柔，則萬化俱息；以言其堅固，則入水不溺，入火不焚，入金石無礙。虎兒不能傷，刀兵不能加，是命之所寄也。

This dharma-body “supports Heaven above and supports the Earth below.”⁴³ It has no head and no tail, no front and no back; it stands at the center and does not slant. Through its firmness, it breaks up Emptiness; through its yieldingness, it puts the ten thousand things to rest; through its solidity and stability, it enters water without becoming wet, enters fire without being burnt, and enters metals and stones without meeting obstructions. A tiger cannot harm it, a weapon cannot impose itself on it.⁴⁴ This is what your Existence depends on. (Id., 7a).

The center mentioned in Liu Yiming’s description of the dharma-body is also explicit in the Chinese name of the “celestial mind”: *tianxin* literally means Heart (or, Center) of Heaven. The “true” body and mind, therefore, are two aspects of the same center defined as the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier, as we have seen above.

As a consequence, once again, of the shift from the precelestial to the post-celestial domains, the awareness of the “true” body and mind is lost: “... the dharma-body is buried and the illusory body takes charge, the celestial mind retires from its position and the human mind takes power.”⁴⁵ Internal Alchemy makes it possible to attain “the utmost of quiescence,” which is a property of the celestial mind.⁴⁶ When the inner alchemical process is fully achieved, it cul-

⁴² The “upward-facing basin” is a common image of Zhen ䷩, the trigram that represents the crescent Moon, which in turn is an image of Pure Yin (*chunyin* 純銀) generating the Yang principle. On the Pearl of Millet see note 18 above.

⁴³ These or similar words are attributed to several Buddhist masters, including Huineng 慧能 (638-713), the sixth Patriarch of Chan (Zen).

⁴⁴ These sentences allude to a passage in *Daode jing* 50: “I have heard that one who is good at assisting life travels by land and does not encounter rhinoceroses and tigers, passes through an army and does not bear armor and weapons. Rhinoceroses have no place to plant their horns, tigers have no place to thrust their claws, and weapons have no place to stab their blades.”

⁴⁵ *Discriminations*, ch. 4, “True and False Body and Mind,” 6b-7a.

⁴⁶ *Discriminations*, ch. 9, “Great and Small Reverted Elixir” 大小還丹, 14b, quoted later in the pres-



minates in the birth of the Embryo of Sainthood (*shengtai* 聖胎): “Like a fruit that ripens and falls to the ground, you deliver your dharma-body.”⁴⁷ What many authors of Neidan texts describe as the alchemical embryo, therefore, is equivalent to one’s dharma-body, or “true body.”

THE TWO WAYS OF INTERNAL ALCHEMY

The most important section in *Discriminations* to appreciate Liu Yiming’s views on Internal Alchemy is Chapter 19. Here Liu Yiming makes a fundamental distinction between two ways of self-cultivation, which he calls “superior virtue” (*shangde* 上德) and “inferior virtue” (*xiade* 下德).⁴⁸ Both terms derive from the *Daode jing*, where they refer to “non-doing” (*wuwei* 無為) and “doing” (*youwei* 有為), respectively:

上德不德，是以有德。下德不失德，是以無德。

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

Superior virtue has no doing – there is nothing whereby it does;
inferior virtue does – there is something whereby it does.⁴⁹

This passage is quoted in the main scripture of Internal Alchemy, the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three), where superior and inferior virtue define the two ways of realization upheld by this text:

上德無為，不以察求，下德為之，其用不休。

“Superior virtue has no doing”:
it does not use examining and seeking.
“Inferior virtue does”:
its operation does not rest.⁵⁰

The difference between the two ways reflects the individual qualities of the person to whom they are addressed. The superior way of “non-doing,” according to Liu Yiming, is accessible by those in whom the precelestial has not been damaged and the original state of Unity is unspoiled:

蓋上德者，體全德備、乾陽未傷之人。……當乾陽具足之時，純粹至精，渾然一氣，五行攢簇，四象和合，寶物佳珍，件件具全。

Essentially, in superior virtue one’s body is intact and one’s virtue is full, and the Yang of Qian 乾 has never been damaged ... When the Yang of Qian is plentiful, with a

ent article. The expression “utmost of quiescence” derives from the *Daode jing*, sec. 16: “Attain the ultimate of emptiness, guard the utmost of quiescence.”

⁴⁷ *Discriminations*, id., quoted later in the present article.

⁴⁸ More details on the views of Liu Yiming on this subject, and on their background in the earlier Neidan tradition, are found in my article, “Superior Virtue, Inferior Virtue: A Doctrinal Theme in the Works of the Daoist Master Liu Yiming (1734-1821)”, PREGADIO 2014: 460-498.

⁴⁹ *Daode jing*, sec. 38.

⁵⁰ *Zhouyi cantong qi*, sec. 20; PREGADIO 2011: 78.



pure and flawless perfect Essence and an inchoate One Breath, the five agents gather together and the four images join in harmony.⁵¹ All of the precious things are intact. (*Discriminations*, ch. 19, “Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue”上德下德, 30a).

These persons, as mentioned above, have an innate potential to preserve the precelestial state and therefore only need to know how to “protect it and guard it.” This requires receiving the instructions of a master, but the method (*fa* 法) ultimately consists in following the Tao itself: there is no need to “do” a practice, and one operates by “non-doing.” This is the way of superior virtue.

For those who cannot preserve the original state, the precelestial is scattered and hidden within the postcelestial, and the postcelestial takes over:

若夫下德者，自陽極陰生之後，先天已散，五行各分，四象不和，諸般寶物皆失。

As for inferior virtue, after the Yang culminates and the Yin is born, the precelestial is dispersed. The five agents are divided from one another, the four images are not in harmony, and all of the precious things are lost. (Id., 31a).

To recover the precelestial state, one cannot operate by “non-doing”:

若以無為之道修之，猶如鼎中無種子，水火煮空鑄，濟的甚事？

If you cultivate this state by the way of “non-doing,” it would be as if in the tripod there is no Seed; what is the purpose of using water and fire to boil an empty pot?⁵² (Id., 31a).

Since the “seed” of the Elixir has been lost, one cannot use “non-doing” anymore and one instead needs “doing”: one needs a technique (*shu* 術) through which one can rejoin the True Yang and True Yin now found within the postcelestial Yin and Yang, respectively. This is the way of Internal Alchemy, which therefore is the way of inferior virtue.

Liu Yiming’s views on superior and inferior virtue mirror those of part of the earlier Neidan tradition, and have significant consequences on the understanding of Taoist alchemy as a whole. While I cannot deal with this subject here, an important aspect of Liu Yiming’s discourse deserves attention. Liu Yiming emphasizes that maintaining Unity means preserving the integrity of the precelestial state itself: this, he adds, “does not mean that the postcelestial body has not lost its integrity.”⁵³ With these words, Liu Yiming touches on a major issue within Internal Alchemy. According to certain traditions, “losing integrity” (*poshen* 破身) refers to the first emission of the essence (*jing*, semen) in a male, an event that is deemed to cause, and to signal, the loss of the precelestial state: the first emission of the essence is seen as equivalent to the shift

⁵¹ The term “four images” (*sixiang* 四象) may refer to several sets of emblems that represent spatial subdivisions or temporal sequences. All of them are, in any case, images of the differentiation of Unity into multiplicity.

⁵² These sentences allude to a poem in the *Wuzhen pian*: “If in the tripod there is no True Seed, it is like using water and fire to boil an empty pot” (“Jueju,” poem 5; see CLEARY 1987: 63).

⁵³ *Discriminations*, ch. 19, “Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue,” 30b.



from Qian ☰ to Li ☷ that occurs when the postcelestial state is generated. According to this understanding, the recovery of the fullness of Qian (Unity, or True Yang, the principle sought by the alchemist) occurs through the recovery of the fullness of one's essence; and on this basis, "keeping one's form intact" refers to the integrity of the postcelestial body. Liu Yiming rejects this view: the state of the postcelestial body, he says, cannot be the criterion to distinguish superior virtue from inferior virtue. This is, first of all, because the postcelestial essence pertains to the postcelestial "illusory body," and not to the "dharma-body." Moreover, while breathing and the cognitive spirit begin to develop immediately after birth, the postcelestial essence "comes into being after one's birth," and therefore is unrelated to the original precelestial state.⁵⁴ The conclusion, says Liu Yiming, is that "when the precelestial is intact, that is superior virtue, and when the precelestial is lacking, that is inferior virtue." Superior virtue, in other words, is distinct from the condition of the postcelestial body; it is only defined by the preservation of the precelestial state.

INTERNAL ALCHEMY AND THE ELIXIR

In *Discriminations*, Liu Yiming writes: "The Golden Elixir is the Great Ultimate ... All discourses about refining the Golden Elixir are teachings about the Great Ultimate."⁵⁵ The Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極) is the state of Unity prior to the division of the One into the two: Yin and Yang, precelestial and postcelestial. Being obtained through the conjunction of Yin and Yang, the Elixir opens the gate to the realization of the state of Unity.

"Doing" and "Non-Doing"

In addition to this central definition, Liu Yiming establishes a key difference between two aspects, or stages, of the Elixir. The two stages focus on the cultivation of Nature and Existence, and they precisely correspond to the ways of superior and inferior virtue, or of "non-doing" and "doing," respectively. These two approaches are the subject of a poem in the *Wuzhen pian*:

始於有作人難見，及至無為眾始知、但見無為為要妙，豈知有作是根基。

It begins with *doing*, and hardly can one see a thing,
when it comes to *non-doing*, all begin to understand.
But if you only see *non-doing* as the essential marvel,
how can you know that *doing* is the foundation?⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Discriminations*, ch. 2, "Postcelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit," 2b-3a. According to the traditional Chinese view, the postcelestial essence first manifests itself at the age of 14 in females, and of 16 in males.

⁵⁵ *Discriminations*, ch. 15, "Refining the Nine Tripods" 伏煉九鼎, 24b and 25a.

⁵⁶ *Wuzhen pian*, "Jueju," poem 42; see CLEARY 1987: 101.



Having quoted this poem, Liu Yiming continues by criticizing what he sees as examples of misunderstanding of “doing” and “non-doing” with regard to self-cultivation practices. About “doing” he writes:

後人不知有作是何說，或子午運氣，或運轉河車，或心腎相交，或任督相會，或聚氣腦後，或氣衝頂門，或調呼吸之氣，或煉交感之精，或肘後飛金晶，或搖骨而擺髓，或吞日月之精，或服雲霞之氣，或爐火而煉金石，或御女而取閨丹，或煉天罡之氣，或聚五臟之精。

People in later times have not understood the discourses about “doing.” Some circulate their breath (*qi*) between *zi* and *wu*, others cycle the River Chariot;⁵⁷ some join [the breaths of] the heart and the kidneys to one another, and others connect the channels of Function and Control;⁵⁸ some gather their breath behind their brain, and others cause their breath to surge up to their sinciput; some harmonize the breath of inspiration and expiration, and others refine their sexual essence; some cause the Essence of Metal to ascend on the back of the body,⁵⁹ and others shake their bones causing their marrow to move up and down; some inhale the essences of the Sun and Moon, and others ingest the breaths of the clouds and the mist; some refine metals and stones in the fire of a furnace, and others “ride women” in order to collect the “female elixir”;⁶⁰ some refine the Breath of Celestial Net, and others gather the essences of the five viscera.⁶¹ (*Discriminations*, ch. 20, “Doing and Non-Doing” 有為無為, 32b)

About “non-doing” he writes:

不知無為是何說，或守黃庭，或思囟門，或思鼻端，或觀明堂，或守臍下，或思夾脊，或觀空，或觀心，或止念，或忘形，或默朝上帝，或鑑形凝神，或思神出殼。

As for those who have not understood the discourses about “non-doing,” some guard the Yellow Court, and others concentrate on their fontanel;⁶² some concentrate on the tip of their nose, and others contemplate the Hall of Light;⁶³ some guard the point below the navel, and others concentrate on the Spinal Handle;⁶⁴ some contemplate emptiness, and others contemplate the mind; some stop their thoughts, and others

⁵⁷ The earthly branches *zi* 子 and *wu* 午 represent the beginning and the midpoint of the cyclical route of breath (*qi*) in the breathing practices. River Chariot (*heche* 河車) is one of the terms that denotes that route, formed by the Function and the Control vessels (*renmai* 任脈 and *dumai* 督脈) that run through the front and the back of the body, respectively. Along that route, or “river,” a “chariot” transports one’s breath. See WANG MU 2011: 71-74.

⁵⁸ See the previous note.

⁵⁹ “Causing the Essence of Metal to ascend on the back of the body” (*zhouchou fei jinjing* 脘後飛金精) is one of the Neidan methods first described in the *Lingbao bifǎ* 靈寶畢法 (Complete Methods of the Numinous Treasure); see BALDRIAN-HUSSEIN 1984: 136-37.

⁶⁰ “Riding women” (*yunü* 御女) is a common expression that denotes the sexual practices, or “arts of the bedroom” (*fangzhong shù* 房中術), which are primarily addressed to males.

⁶¹ Celestial Net (*tianwang* 天罡) is one of the stars of the Northern Dipper. Chapter 17 of *Discriminations* is entirely devoted to this star, which according to Liu Yiming “rules over life and death, and controls your Nature and your Existence” (ch. 17, “The Ebb and Flow of Celestial Net” 天罡消息, 27b).

⁶² On the Yellow Court see note 23 above.

⁶³ Hall of Light (*mingtang* 明堂) in this sentence could refer to several parts of the body, including the nose (which, however, is also mentioned in the previous sentence) and the heart.

⁶⁴ On the Spinal Handle see note 23 above.



forget their forms; some silently have audience with the Supreme Emperor (*shangdi*), others reflect their form in a mirror and coagulate their Spirit, and others concentrate on their Spirit in order to “exit the shell.”⁶⁵ (Id., 32b-33a).

Adepts of the practices qualified as “non-doing,” in Liu Yiming’s view, “stick to emptiness” (*zhukong* 著空), while adepts of the practices qualified as “doing” commit the opposite error and “cling to phenomenal appearances” (*zhixiang* 執相).⁶⁶ The way to avoid these errors, according to Liu Yiming, is to apply the operation of “non-doing” and “doing” to the alchemical practice. In the context of Neidan, “non-doing” and “doing” refer to two aspects, or stages, of the practice that focus on the cultivation of Nature and Existence, respectively:

夫性命必須雙修，工夫還要兩段。

Nature and Existence must be cultivated together, but in the practice there should be two stages. (*Discriminations*, ch. 19, “Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue,” 31b-32a).

Those who are able to follow the way of superior virtue perform the two stages simultaneously:

上德者不待修命而即修性，性了而命亦了。

In superior virtue, there is no need to cultivate Existence and one just cultivates Nature: when Nature is fulfilled, then Existence is also fulfilled. (Id., 32a).

Everyone else should perform the two stages in sequence, starting from the lower one and then proceeding to the higher one:

下德者必先修命而後修性，了命又必了性。

In inferior virtue, one must first cultivate Existence and then cultivate Nature; after Existence is fulfilled, one must also fulfill Nature.⁶⁷ (Id., 32a).

Therefore the way of superior virtue attains both stages simultaneously by means of “non-doing.” Inferior virtue, instead, is the gradual way: Internal Alchemy enables one first to recover the True Seed (*zhenzhong* 真種) of the Elixir by “doing,” and then to nourish it by “non-doing.” Despite the differences between these two ways of cultivation, Liu Yiming adds an important remark: when both stages of inferior virtue are fulfilled, “then this road has led to the same destination as superior virtue.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ The “shell” (*qiao* 賦) is the mortal body.

⁶⁶ *Discriminations*, ch. 20, “Doing and Non-Doing,” 32b, 33a.

⁶⁷ The two stages mentioned by Liu Yiming should not be confused with the common subdivision of the practice of Internal Alchemy into three, four, or more stages. In fact, Liu Yiming subdivides the practice into as many as 18 stages in Chapter 26 (“Exerting One’s Mind to Inquire into the Principles” 盡心窮理) of *Discriminations*, although – on the basis of their names – it seems possible to reduce them to the preliminary stage of “laying the foundations” followed by the customary three main stages. On the sequence of the practice in Internal Alchemy see WANG MU 2011.

⁶⁸ *Discriminations*, ch. 19, “Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue,” 31a.



The Two Elixirs

When the two ways of realization are accomplished beginning from inferior virtue, the stages mentioned above correspond to two different Elixirs. Their ingredients are the Internal Medicine (*neiyao* 內藥) and the External Medicine (*waiyao* 外藥). The Internal Medicine is one's own True Mercury (True Yin), and the External Medicine is the True Lead (True Yang) now found in the “other house”:

內藥者，一己所有；外藥者，他家所出。一己所有者，靈汞是也；他家所出者，真鉛是也。

The Internal Medicine is possessed by oneself; the External Medicine comes from the “other house.” What is possessed by oneself is Numinous Mercury; what comes from the “other house” is True Lead. (*Discriminations*, ch. 8, “The Internal and the External Medicines” 內外藥物, 12b).

These two ingredients, according to Liu Yiming, are related to the cultivation of Nature and Existence, respectively. In another work, he also associates them with the two “bodies,” saying: “Without the External Medicine, you cannot shed the illusory body; without the Internal Medicine, you cannot deliver the dharma-body.”⁶⁹

The two Elixirs are the Small Reverted Elixir (*xiao huandan* 小還丹) and Great Reverted Elixir (*da huandan* 大還丹). The Small Reverted Elixir is obtained through the conjunction of True Lead and True Mercury. Liu Yiming describes it by means of familiar alchemical images, such as Lead and Mercury, or the Lord of Metal (*jingong* 金公) and the Lovely Maid (*chanü* 姥女):

以鉛制汞，以水濟火，以金公配姥女，以黑虎駕赤龍，以烏龜吞朱雀，以他家制我家。

Lead controls Mercury; Water is in accord with Fire; the Lord of Metals couples with the Lovely Maid; the Black Tiger harnesses the Red Dragon; the Dark Turtle swallows the Vermilion Sparrow; and the “other house” controls “my house.” (*Discriminations*, ch. 9, “Great and Small Reverted Elixir” 大小還丹, 14a).

The purpose of this Elixir “consists in returning from the postcelestial to the precelestial.” This is the movement of ascent performed through Internal Alchemy, the “inversion of the course” that had led from the precelestial to the postcelestial.

This, however, is only the first part of the alchemical practice, and the Elixir compounded at this stage can be unexpectedly lost:

所言小者，僅還其元，復其當年之原本，如虧者而又足，去者而復還。此丹雖還，尚未經火煅煉，一時不謹，猶有得而復失之患。

This Elixir is called “small” only because you revert to the Origin and return to the original foundation of times past. It is as if what was lacking becomes again plentiful,

⁶⁹ *Xiuzhen biannan*, 12a.



as if what had left comes back. But although this Elixir has “reverted,” it has not yet gone through refinement by Fire. If you are careless for only one instant, you will obtain it and then lose it again. (Id., 14a).

For this reason, the practice should be completed by compounding the Great Reverted Elixir:

於此再加向上工夫，重安爐，復立鼎，將此還丹溫之養之，以至虛極靜篤，貞下起元，復運陰符陽火，漸抽漸添，自無而有，自微而著，十月胎全，瓜熟蒂落，脫出法身，是曰大丹。

This is why there is an additional higher level of practice. Arrange again the furnace and newly set up the tripod, and warmly nourish the Reverted Elixir in order to “attain the ultimate of emptiness and the utmost of quiescence.”⁷⁰ Going through repeated cycles, you again set in motion the Yin Response (*yinfu*) and the Yang Fire (*yanghuo*); by gradually extracting and gradually augmenting, you go from Non-Being to Being, and from the subtle to the manifest.⁷¹ “In ten months the embryo is complete”: like a fruit that ripens and falls to the ground, you deliver your dharma-body. This is the Great Elixir.⁷² (Id., 14a-b).

With the Great Reverted Elixir, one performs the complementary movement of descent, returning “from Non-Being to Being, and from the subtle to the manifest.” Thus Internal Alchemy, through its gradual process, enables one to ascend to the precelestial, but its practice is concluded when the descent to the postcelestial is also performed. Then the precelestial and the postcelestial become one; through the operation of “non-doing,” one transforms (*hua* 化) the postcelestial into the precelestial.

Tripod, Furnace, and the Fire Phases

Another aspect of Liu Yiming’s views that deserves mention is his criticism of the tendency of turning the formless into something provided with form. According to Liu Yiming, this results in confining oneself within the postcelestial, and removes the possibility of attaining the precelestial.

With regard to the human body, for example, Internal Alchemy typically identifies the kidneys as the Yin organs containing True Yang, and the heart as the Yang organ containing True Yin. Kidneys and heart are therefore equated with

⁷⁰ See note 46 above.

⁷¹ On the Yin Response and the Yang Fire see the next section. At this stage of the practice, “extracting and augmenting” (*choutian* 抽添) means augmenting Mercury and decreasing Lead. In the *Xiuzhen biannan*, 12b, Liu Yiming explains that, after one attains True Lead (the precelestial True Yang) and through it one “dries” Mercury (the postcelestial Yin), one applies “the natural True Fire” found within Mercury to eliminate the breath (*qi*) of Lead itself. In this way, the postcelestial serves to eliminate the Yin that surrounds True Yang (陰), and at the same time is transformed by the Pure Yang (陽) that it contributes to attain. This occurs through “non-doing.”

⁷² The words “in ten months the embryo is complete” derive from the *Wuzhen pian*, “Lüshi,” poem 9; trans. PREGADIO 2009: 48.



the trigrams Kan 乾 and Li 厦, respectively. Liu Yiming, instead, advises that Kan and Li are formless principles and should not be identified with physical organs:

蓋先天造化，無形無象，不著於有，不落於無，無形而能生形，無象而能生象，何得以心腎為坎離也？夫心腎者，乃後天有形有象之物，不但不是先天坎離，而並不是後天坎離，乃後天坎離之淳質耳。

Essentially, the precelestial creation and transformation is devoid of forms and images; it does not stick to Being and does not sink into Non-Being. It has no form, but can generate forms; it has no image, but can generate images. How then could the heart and the kidneys be Kan and Li? The heart and the kidneys are postcelestial things provided with forms and images. Not only they are not the precelestial Kan and Li, but they are not even the postcelestial Kan and Li: they are only the sediments of the postcelestial Kan and Li. (*Discriminations*, ch. 23, “Precelestial and Postcelestial Kan and Li” 先後坎離, 37a).

An analogous distinction is established by Liu Yiming with regard to the alchemical tripod and furnace. To discuss this point, he first quotes a poem from the *Wuzhen pian*:

先把乾坤為鼎器，次搏烏兔藥來烹，既驅二物歸黃道，爭得金丹不解生。

First take Qian 乾 and Kun 厦 as the tripod and the furnace,
then catch the crow and the hare and boil the Medicine.

Once you have chased the two things and they have returned to the Yellow Path,
how could the Golden Elixir not be born?⁷³

Then Liu Yiming notes that tripod and furnace should neither be identified with the material instruments used in External Alchemy (Waidan 外丹), nor be understood as “women used as furnaces and tripods” in sexual practices described through alchemical language:

觀此則知爐鼎為修煉之首著，若無爐鼎，藥自何收，丹自何煉也？但爐鼎非外面銅鐵泥土之爐鼎，亦非閨丹女子之爐鼎。

Just by looking at these verses, we know that the Furnace and the Tripod are the most important things in one's cultivation and refining. Without a Furnace and a Tripod, how could you collect the Medicine and refine the Elixir?

However, this Furnace and this Tripod are not external furnaces and tripods made of iron or clay, and are not women used as furnaces and tripods for the collection of the “female elixir.” (*Discriminations*, ch. 11, “Furnace and Tripod in the Initial and the Final Stages” 前後爐鼎, 16b-17a).

Tripod, furnace, and even the Elixir itself are, in Liu Yiming's view, merely names and images used to represent formless principles:

⁷³ *Wuzhen pian*, “Jueju,” poem 1; see CLEARY 1987: 59. The crow and the hare represent True Yin and True Yang, respectively, as the two ingredients of the Elixir. “Yellow Path” (*huangdao* 黃道) here does not refer – as it usually does – to the circuit of the Sun around the Earth, but to the path along which Breath (*qi*) is circulated within the practitioner's body, in order to generate the first “seed” of the Elixir.



其實鼎爐金丹，皆假名托象，顯露消息耳。名象尚且無，更何有女鼎爐灶之穢行邪事耶？

In fact, Tripod, Furnace, and Golden Elixir are borrowed names and loaned images, which only serve to make a certain key point visible. If even names and images actually do not apply, what could one say of the filthy practices and the evil pursuits of using women as tripods, or of relying on furnaces and stoves? (*Discriminations*, ch. 15, “Refining the Nine Tripods” 伏煉九鼎, 25b).

The alchemical practice has nothing to do with either the male or the female “illusory body,” and also with material instruments:

從虛無中結就，並無男女等相，不干氣質皮囊。故古仙云：「鼎鼎原無鼎，藥藥亦無藥。」其所云爐鼎藥物者，是借爐火烹煎之象，形容修煉金丹之法，而非實有爐鼎之說。

The coagulation [of the Elixir] occurs within Empty Non-Being, and neither has anything to do with men and women, nor is concerned with this skin bag made of breath and matter.⁷⁴ ... When we speak of “furnace and tripod” and of “ingredients,” we borrow the image of heating by means of a furnace fire, in order to illustrate the method of refining the Golden Elixir. However, this has nothing to do with the discourses about furnaces and tripods. (Id., 24b).

Equally important are the Liu Yiming’s views on the system used to determine the stages of heating the Elixir, known as “fire phases” (*huohou 火候*). This system uses cosmological emblems, including the twelve “earthly branches” (*dizhi 地支*), in order to match the cycling of internal Fire to the external time cycles (in particular, the twelve double hours of the day and the twelve months of the year). Fire is progressively increased in the initial six stages (called “advancing the Yang,” *jinyang 進陽*, or simply the “Yang Fire,” *yanghuo 陽火*), and then progressively decreased in the final six stages (called “withdrawing the Yin,” *tuiyin 退陰*, or the “Yin Response,” *yinfu 陰符*).⁷⁵ Faithful to the famous statement, “the True Fire fundamentally has no phases,” attributed to Bai Yuchan and quoted in several Neidan works, Liu Yiming points out that the true fire phases have nothing to do with time in the ordinary sense, and even less so with the emblems used to mark ordinary time – in particular, the earthly branches *zi 子*, *wu 午*, *mao 卯*, and *you 酉*. Concerning this point, he writes:

噫！此乃天之子午卯酉，與我何涉？夫天有天之時，我有我之時。

Alas! Those are the *zi*, *wu*, *mao*, and *you* of Heaven: what do they have to do with me? Heaven has Heaven’s time, I have my own time. (*Discriminations*, ch. 21, “Zi, Wu, Mao, You” 子午卯酉, 34b).

Nonetheless, Liu Yiming also quotes a poem found in the *Wuzhen pian*, which states:

⁷⁴ A Buddhist expression that refers to the body.

⁷⁵ See WANG MU 2011: 102-5.



縱識朱砂與黑鉛，不知火候也如閑。

Even if you discern the Vermilion Sand and the Black Lead,
it will be useless if you do not know the fire phases.⁷⁶

Therefore, notes Liu Yiming, “fundamentally there are no phases,” and yet one “must know the phases.” For him, this means that one should always regulate one’s operation, within and outside the Neidan practice, by “waiting for the proper time”: “When you encounter the phase of the birth of Yang, you advance the Yang; when you encounter the phase of the birth of Yin, you withdraw the Yin.” The timing of the alchemical work “does not concern the dead time phases of the ordinary hours and days.”⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

While this article has by no means exhausted the subjects treated in *Discriminations* – as even less so in Liu Yiming’s teachings as a whole – the survey found above may suffice to provide a broad summary of his views on Taoism and Internal Alchemy. To conclude, I would like to focus on one particular aspect of Liu Yiming’s views.

As “discrimination” is the main theme underlying the teachings found in this work, it is no surprise that Liu Yiming devotes much attention to the criticism of practices and methods that he sees as unproductive or even as harmful for one’s complete realization. Like other masters did before him, Liu Yiming repeatedly defines these practices and methods as the “external ways” (*waidao* 外道) or the “side gates” (*pangmen* 旁門). Beyond these generic labels, his criticism focuses, as we have seen, on self-cultivation methods that place emphasis on what he calls the “illusory body” and the “illusory mind,” including not only traditional forms of Taoist and Buddhist practice, but even aspects of Internal Alchemy as is commonly understood. Clearly Liu Yiming’s point is not to criticize Internal Alchemy per se, which he does equate with the way of inferior virtue, but recommends to all those who cannot follow the way of superior virtue; in fact, he makes clear that the two ways can lead to the same state of realization. His point, rather, is to remind that one should not restrict oneself to the way of inferior virtue: in “doing” one’s practice, one should be able to stop at the right time and then proceed to “non-doing,” the way of superior virtue.

The other major focus of criticism is sexual practices. We have seen above that Liu Yiming advices against “using women” for one’s practice, and against taking women “as furnaces and tripods” in order to collect the ingredient of the Elixir, under the wrong belief that the term “other house” – the Yin containing True Yang – refers to “actual people.” According to Liu Yiming, this

⁷⁶ *Wuzhen pian*, “Jueju,” poem 27; see CLEARY 1987: 85.

⁷⁷ *Discriminations*, ch. 12, “Internal and External Fire Phases” 內外火候, 18a.



error is even worse than the one made by those who practice alchemy by identifying formless principles with the “illusory body,” or by “relying on furnaces and stoves” and practicing External Alchemy. As we have seen, he explains the reason of the error by saying that “the coagulation [of the Elixir] occurs within Empty Non-Being,” and therefore it “neither has anything to do with men and women, nor is concerned with this skin bag made of breath and matter,” or the illusory body.

One of the tasks of alchemy is to reveal the analogies that occur among different domains, but ultimately it is the practitioner’s or the reader’s personal attitude that determine and qualify his or her understanding. Liu Yiming continuously urges his disciples and readers to look at all this from the higher level of the principles, from which the lower levels can be understood, and to refrain from limiting their perspective to any of the lower levels, from which the higher levels could not be understood. This, however, does not lead him to a dualistic way of seeing, in which the whole field of the teaching is reduced to setting the right against the wrong, or the superior against the inferior; understanding Liu Yiming in this way would mean to restrict oneself within in the perspective that he urges to overcome. In fact, Liu Yiming makes clear that there is a level in which even the main distinction that he draws between the two approaches to Neidan, the one based on “doing” and the one based on “non-doing,” is transcended:

為上德下德者下手而設。若到大道完成，不但有為用不著，即無為亦用不著。至於向上一著，別有妙用，又不在有無之例。

The Ways of “doing” and “non-doing” are established to provide a starting point to those who possess superior virtue or inferior virtue. When one comes to fully achieving the Great Tao, not only does the operation of “doing” not apply, but also the operation of “non-doing” does not apply. When one reaches the highest step there is a different wondrous operation, but it does not pertain to either “doing” or “non-doing.” (*Discriminations*, ch. 19, “Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue,” 32a).

What Liu Yiming means by “highest step” – and by implication, what he means by any of the lower steps – does not require definition or discussion. To understand what he means, it is sufficient to read again his preface to *Discriminations*.

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