

The Alchemical Body in Daoism

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Abstract

This paper surveys some of the main features of the view of the human body in Daoist internal alchemy (*neidan* 内丹). The first sections discuss three different terms that refer to the body; cosmological, political, theological, natural, and alchemical metaphors used to describe it; and the use of the body as a support for the system of correspondences that tie the human being to the cosmos. On this background, the development of internal alchemy closely relates to the earlier Daoist meditation practices on the inner gods. The figure of the Red Child (the innermost deity of the human being), in particular, bears close analogies to the “embryo” that alchemists generate through their practices. The final sections are concerned with the two main alchemical charts of the human body and with the use of the Buddhist concept of “dharma-body,” which some masters describe as the true immortal body.

It is virtually impossible to distinguish the Daoist understanding of the body from its understanding of the human being, and this point constitutes on its own a central aspect of the Daoist way of seeing. For a Daoist, knowledge of the anatomic forms and the physiological workings of the body, or any of its parts and organs, is virtually irrelevant. The physical body performs another function: it serves to support different sets of metaphors that express the relation of the whole person to the Dao, the ultimate principle to which the person owes its existence.

These metaphors may be cosmological (the body as a microcosm), political (the body as an administrative system), theological (the body as the residence of inner gods), natural (the body as a “landscape”), and alchemical (the body as a laboratory for compounding the elixir), to name the most important ones. These different sets of metaphors are not mutually exclusive; they may be integrated with one another and are, at

times, even equivalent. The emphasis on the symbolic aspects of the body is also the main aspect in which Daoism differs from Chinese traditional medicine: despite the shared aspects in the respective ways of seeing, Daoism views the body as an instrument for “returning to the Dao.” Catherine Despeux draws attention to this point:

It is certainly surprising to find that, even in medical sources, the physiological, biological, and anatomical descriptions are not as detailed as one would expect. . . . As for the Daoists, they have considered the body in its practical ends, in its uses, developing all kinds of body techniques that intend to liberate the individual from the constraints of the physical body, and consequently to entrust a major role to the symbolic body. (1996, 87-88)

It would be impossible to describe the Daoist “alchemical body” without taking this background into account. About one half of this article, therefore, is concerned with the general Daoist views of the body, and the other half with the views of the body in alchemy. It is also worth reminding that here we shall be concerned with one of the two main branches of the Chinese alchemical tradition. In the first branch, documented from the 2nd century BCE and known as external alchemy (*wai-dan* 外丹), the elixir is compounded through the manipulation of natural substances (primarily mineral and metals). In the second branch, documented from the 8th century CE and known as internal alchemy, the elixir is compounded within the practitioner’s own person.¹

Body, Form, Person

The premodern Chinese view of the human body revolves around three main terms. The first term, *ti* 體, “body,” refers to the corporeal frame as an ordered whole made of interdependent parts; it denotes the physical body made of skin, flesh, limbs, bones, muscles, tissues, vessels, and all other material components. The second term, *xing* 形, “form,” is quite complex; it may be understood in contrast to the idea of “formlessness” (*wuxing* 無形), which is a property attributed to Dao. “Form,” in this per-

¹ Other overviews of the “Daoist body” are found in Lévi 1989; Kohn 1991; Despeux 1996; and Miller 2001. A survey of the premodern Chinese views of the body is found in Lewis 2006, 13-76. For traditional medicine, see Sivin 1987.

spective, refers to the embodiment as the feature that identifies every individual entity in the "world of form," distinguishing it from—but also relating it to—all other entities. The third term, *shen* 身, is the most comprehensive; it denotes the whole human being in both its physical and non-physical aspects. *Shen* often is best translated as "person" and at times can also be rendered as "oneself." An expression such as *xiushen* 修身, for example, means "cultivating one's person" or "cultivating oneself"; it refers to cultivating not only the body, but one's entire person.²

These terms show that the ordinary Western notion of "body" as physical frame or structure is inadequate to convey the complexity of the Chinese view. For our present subject, an additional issue requires attention. Each facet of the "body" mentioned above obviously requires the other two, but the variety of notions embraced by the three terms raises the question which is at the center of the Daoist discourse?

It can hardly be said that Daoism focuses on the physical body: several loci at the basis of Daoist practices do not even exist at the purely physical level. For instance, the three Cinnabar Fields (*dantian* 丹田) are located in abdomen, heart, and brain, but are not equivalent to these or any other bodily part or organ. In other cases, the loci at the basis of Daoist practices have corporeal counterparts, but their emblematic functions are more significant than those performed by the body parts themselves. The main example is the five viscera (*wuzang* 五臟)—liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys. In their discourse on the viscera, Daoists show little or no interest in the physical organs per se: they serve instead as material supports for a predetermined system of correspondences between the human being and its immediate and remote surroundings.

Thus, a merely anatomic representation and description of the body is the last of all concerns in Daoism. Rather than *ti* (the physical body), the Daoist discourse and practices focus on *xing* (the form) and *shen* (the whole person). Thus Daoist texts talk of "refining the form" (*lianxing* 煉形) and not of "refining the body"; and they talk of "governing one's person" (or "oneself," *zhishen* 治身) and not of "governing the body." In this

² Explications of these terms, some of which differ from the understanding suggested here, are found in Kohn 1991, 241-47; Sivin 1995, 14; Despeux 1996, 88-89; Engelhardt 2000, 95-96; Pregadio 2004. See also Ames 1993, 164-70, where the Daoist views are barely taken into account.

view, maintaining the physical body in good health is not end in itself; it serves to ensure that the body and its parts and organs may fulfill their emblematic functions.

The “Symbolic Vision”

Daoist soteriology refers to a state that transcends the boundaries of the cosmos and individuality, and defines that state as the condition of the saint or sage (*shengren* 聖人) or the realized person (*zhenren* 真人). To achieve that state, Daoists have elaborated a large number of practices, generally designated under the label of “nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生; Engelhardt 2000). Here they emphasize the symbolic body, to which the emblematic functions mentioned above pertain.

Kristofer Schipper similarly uses the term “symbolic vision” to refer to the representation of the body that supports the Daoist views. Citing the famous sentence, “The human body is the image of a country,” which pertains to the political metaphor, he notes that this statement

corresponds above all to the Daoist vision of the inner world and to related physical exercises. . . . These descriptions correspond to secret teachings intended for adepts, to complement oral teachings, and seem at first to be obscure, even incomprehensible. (1993, 104)

The symbolic body or symbolic vision of the body centers on several key notions and representations, which receive more or less emphasis according to individual cases. Leaving aside the alchemical representation per se, four of them are especially important (see also Bidlack 2015, 58-72):

(1) The human being is a microcosm that contains and reproduces all of the main features of the macrocosm.

(2) The human being is an administrative system that parallels the bureaucratic systems of the state and of the heavens.

(3) The human being is inhabited by a pantheon of deities that reside in the main organs and loci of the body.

(4) The human being is depicted as a natural landscape—in particular, as a mountain—with peaks, watercourses and other features that correspond to specific internal loci or to “flows of energy.”

These representations do not constitute competing models, and often overlap one another. In particular, the principles that operate in the cosmos and the deities that personify those principles are to a large extent equivalent: one may understand and represent those principles in abstract terms, in deified forms, or simultaneously in both ways. Similarly, illustrations of the body as a landscape (e.g., Fig. 1) include palaces functioning as headquarters for the administration of the body (Despeux



Fig. 1. The human body as a mountain. The picture shows the Cinnabar Fields, the Three Barriers (*sanguan*), and the palaces of the inner deities. Source: *Duren shangpin miaojing neiyi* 度人上品妙經內義 (Inner Meaning of the Wondrous Scripture of the Upper Chapters on Salvation). Despeux 2019, 29-33; Bidlack 2015, 193-208.

1990, 194-98; Huang 2012, 78-81). The different self-cultivation practices based on these representations activate and “incorporate”—in a quite literal sense—the principles that operate in the cosmos or in the heavens.

Cosmos and Body

In the system of so-called “correlative cosmology” (Graham 1989, 315-70; Kalinowski 1991; Schwartz 1985, 350-82), the correspondence between cosmos and body can be expressed by means of several sets of emblems, which are in agreement with one another and can be used conjointly (see Fig. 2). These emblems are seen, especially in Daoism, as different representations of the unfolding of Unity into multiplicity; they include, for example, Yin and Yang (feminine and masculine, receptive and creative, etc.), the five agents (*wuxing* 五行)—namely Wood, Fire, Soil, Metal, and Water—and the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes).

The cosmos-body correspondence is mainly the focus of the system of the five agents, which essentially consists in classifying different macrocosmic, microcosmic, numerical, and other items in a fivefold pattern, so that each item may be related to the others. To give one example, the agent Wood classifies the direction east, the season spring, the numbers 3 and 8, the color green (or blue), the planet Jupiter, the organ liver, and the acoustic phenomenon *jue* 角 in the same category.

In this way, each phenomenon becomes an emblem of the category (or “agent”) to which it belongs. At the same time, its function is defined according to the place it occupies in the system of the five agents as a whole. “Spring” and “liver,” in other words, perform the same symbolic function in relation to the agent Wood. As a consequence the liver, instead of being a mere physical organ, connects the human being to spring and to all other phenomena represented by Wood.

Other expressions of the macrocosm-microcosm doctrine are not based on the five agents; they establish, instead, different symbolic analogies between features of the cosmos and parts or functions of the human body, often on the basis of similarities of form or of numerical correspondences. A well-known passage of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (The Master of Huainan), dating from the 2nd century BCE, presents these analogies as follows:



Fig. 2. Human figure surrounded by emblems associated with Yin and Yang and the five agents: Dragon (Yang) and Tiger (Yin); the hare in Moon (Yang within Yin) and the crow in the Sun (Yin within Yang); trigrams of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes); and names of ingredients of the Internal Elixir. *Yunji qiqian* (Seven Lots from the Bookbag of the Clouds), ch. 72.

The roundness of the head is an image of Heaven; the squareness of the feet is an image of the Earth. Heaven has 4 seasons, 5 agents, 9 directions (*i.e.*, the cardinal and the intermediate directions, and the center), and 366 days; the human being accordingly has 4 limbs, 5 viscera, 9 orifices, and 366 joints. Heaven has wind and rain, cold and heat; the human being accordingly has giving and taking, joy and anger. Therefore the gall bladder is the clouds; the lungs are the air (*qi* 氣); the liver is the wind; the kidneys are the rain; and the spleen is the thunder. As a result, the human being is intimately associated with Heaven and Earth. And the heart is its ruler. (ch. 7)

Similar sets of alloformic correspondences are described in other works not far removed in date from the one quoted above, and grounded on similar views of the cosmos, humanity, and their relation (see also Sivin 1987, 56-58). Certain associations are recurring: for example, Heaven corresponds to the head (because of its roundness); the Earth to the feet (because of their “squareness”); the Sun and the Moon to the ears and the eyes (or to the two eyes); the four seasons to the four limbs; the months and the days to the major and the minor joints; and wind to breathing. Other correspondences are peculiar to the individual texts, but the differences are altogether less important than the shared basic view: the forms and functions of the human being match those of Heaven and Earth.

Daoism inherited these views from the 3rd century CE, when it began to incorporate correlative cosmology into its doctrines and practices. An especially clear example is found in the *Lingbao wufu xu* 靈寶五符序 (Prolegomena to the Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure), a major work dating from around 300:

Among the ten thousand things generated by Heaven, the human being is the most honored one. A person’s [bodily] form (*shenxing* 身形) contains Heaven and Earth. There is nothing that does not serve as model for it:

The Sun and the Moon; the Northern Dipper with its stars Jade-Cog, Armil, and Jade Balance; the five sacred mountains and the four great waterways; mountains, rivers, and oceans; the Earl of the Wind and the Master of the Rain; the stars; the Gods of Soil and Millet; the unicorn and the phoenix; the dragon, the tiger, and the Dark Warrior; the five grains, the mulberry tree, and hemp; the six domestic animals, the ox, and the horse; birds, quadrupeds, fish, turtles, and reptiles; bamboos, trees, and the hundred herbs. (ch. 1)

As portrayed in this passage, the “cosmological” metaphor includes elements of the “natural” metaphor.

State and Body

Both metaphors mentioned above can also seamlessly be integrated with the “political” and the “theological” ones. This is shown by the same text, which continues by saying:

There are also the Son of Heaven with the three dukes, the nine marquises, the twenty-seven dignitaries, and the eighty-one gentlemen. And there are the nine provinces, the 120 commanderies, the 1,200 districts, the 18,000 villages, the 36,000 neighborhoods, and the 180,000 sites. And there are also palaces and towers, houses and dwellings, doors and gates, wells and stoves, pots and kettles, and provisions and grains so that the gods can eat and drink of them. Those who know this can live for a long time. (*Lingbao wufu xu*, ch. 1)

The use of the political metaphor in Daoist self-cultivation is inspired by a traditional Chinese doctrine, which in turn is a central aspect of correlative cosmology: governance should be modeled on the same principles that are at work in the cosmos, and this requires that the ruler also complies with those principles. The ruler's function of "head" of the country involves that he is the formal guarantor of the harmony between cosmos and mankind: dysfunctions in his behavior give rise to disturbances in heaven, on earth, and especially within human society.

This gives rise to two complementary views: first, the ruler should cultivate himself in order to govern the country; second, governing the country (*zhiguo* 治國) and governing the body (or the person, *zhishen* 治身) are models and metaphors of one another. Both views can be illustrated by passages that feature the same main character, namely the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), the mythical sovereign whom the Daoist tradition regards as the model of all human rulers.

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 portrays a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and his Daoist master, Guangcheng zi 廣成子. When the Yellow Emperor inquires about governing the country, Guangcheng zi replies that this question merely concerns "the dregs." When he finally asks about governing oneself, Guangcheng zi replies, "Excellent question! Come, I will tell you about the Perfect Way," and gives this teaching:

Let there be no seeing, no hearing; embrace the spirit in quiescence and the body (*xing* 形, lit., "form") will right itself. Be quiescent and clear, do not labor your body, do not churn up your essence, and then you can live a long life. When the eye does not see, the ear does not hear, and the mind does not know, then your spirit will protect your body, and you will enjoy a long life. Be cautious of what is within you, and block off what is outside

you. Much knowledge will do you harm. (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 11; trans. Watson 1968, 119, slightly modified)

This is how, according to Guangcheng zi, the Yellow Emperor should fulfill his duties as the ruler of humanity. In the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Inner Book of the Yellow Emperor), instead, the Yellow Emperor asks Qi Bo 岐伯, his teacher of medicine, to explain the functions of the inner organs. Qi Bo offers a string of similitudes that are obviously of interest for a ruler. They begin as follows:

The heart is the office of the ruler; it brings forth the light of Spirit (*shenming* 神明). The lungs are the office of the chancellor; they bring forth the ordering of the joints. The liver is the office of the army general; it brings forth planning and strategy. The gall bladder is the office of the rectifiers; it brings forth determinations and decisions. The center of the chest is the office of the agents on site and on mission; it brings forth joy and pleasure. . . .

The list of similes continues with other internal organs: spleen, stomach, large and small intestines, kidneys, triple burner (*sanjiao* 三焦, three immaterial loci placed between the thorax and the abdomen), and urinary bladder. Qi Bo concludes his speech by saying:

When the ruler is bright, his subjects are secure . . . If the ruler is not bright, the twelve offices are in danger; the ways of communication (*dao* 道) are closed and there are obstructions, and the [bodily] form is harmed. Nourishing life in this way brings calamity, and the ancestral lineages of the empire are in great danger. Beware! Beware! (*Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 [Inner Book of the Yellow Emperor: The Simple Questions], ch. 3.8)

The later Daoist tradition assimilates and elaborates on the answers given by Guangcheng zi and Qi Bo. The view that the ruler should cultivate himself in order to perfect his governance runs throughout one of the main commentaries to the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), attributed to Heshang gong 河上公 (2nd c. CE, possibly later). It is stated most explicitly in the notes on the sentence, “Therefore the saint in his government empties the people’s minds and fills their bellies” (*Daode jing* 3), where Heshang gong writes: “This means that for the Saint governing the country and governing oneself are the same thing.” In several

other passages, the commentary establishes the same parallel. For example, commenting on the sentence, "In governing the people and serving Heaven, nothing is better than parsimony" (*Daode jing* 59), Heshang gong says:

In governing the country one should be fond of the people and their assets, and should not be wasteful and arrogant. In governing oneself one should be fond of the essence (*jing* 精) and breath (*qi* 氣), and should not let them escape. . . . *The person and the country are the same thing.*

Other Daoist texts echo Qi Bo's speech to the Yellow Emperor, and here again self-cultivation is likened to governing the state. A renowned example is the following:

The person is the image of a state. Chest and belly are like the ruler's palace, the four limbs are like the suburbs and frontiers, and bones and joints are like the hundred officials. The spirit is like the ruler, blood is like the ministers, and breath is like the people. Therefore, if one is able to govern oneself, one can govern a country. Being fond of the people is the way to make one's country secure; preserving one's breath is the way to keep one's person whole. When the people scatter, the country is lost, and when the breath is exhausted, the person dies. (*Lingbao wufu xu*, ch. 3; also in *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 [The Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature], ch. 18)

By the time this passage was written, Daoism had extended the state-body metaphor even further, developing practices based on the gods that rule over different parts and organs of the body. This view, as we shall see, is one of the direct antecedents to the Daoist alchemical body.

Inner Gods

According to Daoist traditions documented from around 200 CE, the human being hosts a veritable pantheon of gods. The most important among them represent the different degrees of the subdivision of Unity or the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極) into multiplicity, and are related to the main forms and patterns that define the cosmic domain: in particular, the central celestial pole, residence of the Great One (Taiyi 太一) and equivalent to the heart in the human being; the vertical axis, divided into three

segments, equivalent to the three Cinnabar Fields; and the horizontal axis, consisting of four directions arranged around a central point, corresponding to the five viscera.

In addition, the inner gods perform multiple roles related to one another: they allow the human being to communicate with the corresponding gods of the celestial pantheon, serve as administrators of the human body, and guard the balance of the body's main functions. These traditions, it should be added, were especially widespread in southeastern China, a region that was also preeminent for the transmission of external alchemy; the importance of this point will become clear presently.

Several texts describe the features of the inner deities. One of the main sources, the *Huangting jing* 黃庭經 (Scripture of the Yellow Court), dating in its original version from ca. 200 CE (Robinet 1993, 55-96; Despeux 2019, 163-74; Puett 2010, 244-48), for instance, mentions a major series of gods who live within the viscera. Significantly, each of these organs is referred to as a "department" or a "section" (*bu* 部), the same term that denotes a government "ministry," and each of these gods is said to reside in a "palace."

These and other details, such as names, appearances, dimensions, and garments of the gods, are mentioned as supports for meditation practices. In agreement with the classical views on the fateful separation of the spirit (*shen* 神) from the body, several works warn that if the gods (also called *shen*, "spirits") leave their residences, the body dies. "Maintaining one's thoughts" (*cun* 存) on them, and feeding them and their residences with appropriate nourishment—in particular, one's own breath (*qi*) and bodily essences—enables one to keep them in their corporeal dwellings, where they may perform their functions.

These deities are not deemed to possess a physical existence in the ordinary sense of the word; and even though one is often bound to refer to them as "body gods," they do not live in the physical body. They pertain, instead, to a domain that lies midway between formlessness and form, performing the essential task of relating what is above to what is below. Under this aspect, the inner gods are "real," but they are "images" (*xiang* 象) that play an intermediary function "between the world of sensory realities and the world of the unknowable" (Robinet 1993, 50). The person in whom the gods reside neither is possessed by them nor is

"deified" by their presence (for a different view, see Puett 2010, 226-27); in full awareness of one's individual state, the practitioner becomes the focus of a divine representation, of which he is the lone creator and the lone spectator. The organs and loci in which the gods reside in turn cease to be mere "body parts," and become the primary supports that make that representation possible.

From Inner Gods to Internal Alchemy

The inner gods are literally innumerable and different texts describe different pantheons (Pregadio 2006, 131-41), but here we shall mention only one of them. Known as the Red Child (Chizi 赤子; fig. 3), he is featured in the *Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 (Central Scripture of Laozi), dating from around 200 CE (Schipper 1993, 100-12; 1995; Lagerwey 2004; Puett 2010, 238-44). The speaker of this text is Laozi, and the Red Child is no other than Laozi himself, now playing the role of "true self" (*zhenwu* 真吾) of each human being. Speaking of himself in both the first and the third person, he says:

I am the child of Dao; this is what I am. Human beings also have him (i.e., the "child"): it is not only I [who am the child of the Dao]. He (the "child") resides precisely within the ducts of the stomach, the Great Granary. He sits facing due south on a couch of pearls and jade, and a flowery canopy of yellow clouds covers him. He wears clothes with pearls of five hues. His mother resides above on his right, embracing and nourishing him; his father resides above on his left, instructing and defending him. (sec. 12)

From his mother, the Red Child receives the food that allows him to live: "He feeds on yellow gold and jade dumplings, ingests the Divine Elixir and the *zhi* 芝 plant [of immortality], and drinks the Fount of Nectar." Like other inner gods, however, the Child should also be nourished by the person in whom he lives. In particular, the *Central Scripture* mentions a "yellow essence" (*huangjing* 黃精) and a "red breath" (*chiqi* 赤氣), respectively associated with the Moon (Yin) and the Sun (Yang), that should be delivered to him by the adept in meditation.



Fig. 3. Visualizing the Red Child. *Shangqing dadong zhenjing* 上清大洞真經 (True Scripture of the Great Cavern of Highest Clarity; *Daozang jiyao* ed.), ch. 6.

As an image of the “true self,” the Red Child is the main precursor of the “embryo” and the “infant” that, several centuries later, adepts of internal alchemy would generate and nourish by means of their own practices. There are, moreover, evident analogies between the Yin essence and the Yang breath of the *Laozi zhongjing* and the Yin and Yang essences and breaths by which a practitioner of Internal Alchemy conceives and feeds his inner “embryo.”

The alchemical associations do not end here. An additional source of nourishment of the gods is the practitioner’s own salivary juices, which “irrigate” (*guan* 灌) the organs in which the gods reside. The terms used to denote these juices have alchemical connotations: they include

Jade Liquor (*yuye* 玉液), Golden Nectar (*jinli* 金醴), and even Golden Liquor (*jinye* 金液). Finally, one method described in the *Central Scripture* consists in causing the breaths of the heart and the kidneys to descend and rise within one's body, respectively, so that they may join and become one. An analogous practice is performed by internal alchemists when they join the Fire of the heart and the Water of the kidneys (Despeux 2019, 209-15).

The "interiorization" of features of external alchemy is even clearer in the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) tradition of Daoism, which originated in the second half of the 4th century. Shangqing developed in the same region that hosted the traditions mentioned above and inherited the earlier legacies of meditation and alchemy, then re-codified them in two ways. First, it incorporated certain operative practices of external alchemy, but used them especially as a support for meditation (Bokenkamp 1997, 275-372; Pregadio 2006, 141-44). Second, and more importantly, its scriptures contain methods for the creation of an immortal body, or an immortal self, by means of the generation of an inner embryo.

One example is the practice of "untying the knots" (*jiejie* 解結), whereby an adept re-experiences his embryonic development in meditation. From month to month, beginning on the anniversary of his conception—and not of his birth—he receives again the "breaths of the Nine Heavens" (called, with another alchemical allusion, the Nine Elixirs, *jiudan* 九丹) and each time one of his inner organs is turned into gold or jade. Then his Original Father and Mother issue breaths that join at the center of his person, and generate an immortal infant.³

The Alchemical Body, the Elixir, and the Embryo

As far as we know internal alchemy originated as an independent tradition around the 8th century. Since then, it has been transmitted in a large number of lineages and branches, each of which has had its own views of internal alchemy and of its practice.

³ The last part of the practice is more complex than my summary might suggest. See Robinet 1993, 139-43; Bokenkamp 2005, 160-62.

The tradition draws several basic terms from external alchemy that refer to operations, instruments, ingredients, and, most importantly, the idea of the elixir. Because of these analogies, it could easily be construed as a mere transposition of external practices to an inner plane. This view would be reductive: Internal alchemy owes to the meditation practices on the inner gods more than it does to external techniques.

Even this, however, would not suffice to exhaust the complex issue of its origins. Allowing a remarkable freedom in formulating views and framing methods, internal alchemy integrates elements from Daoist meditation practices—especially the images of the embryo and the child as the “true self,” as well as certain details of the practices themselves—with the language of external alchemy, teachings of the *Daode jing*—particularly those on “non-doing” and “doing” and the three-stage cosmogony—physiological practices from the disciplines of “nourishing life” (notably those concerned with breathing), and doctrinal notions from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism.

Especially important is a new cosmological model that uses the ordinary emblems of correlative cosmology, but is devised in a way that allows each successive ontologic stage (non-being, unity, duality, multiplicity) to be reintegrated into the previous one, leading a practitioner to the “return to the Dao” (*huandao* 還道, *fandao* 返道; Pregadio 2011, 36-47, 58-63).

The new unique combination of components resulted, however, in the virtually complete disappearance of the inner gods themselves. Their dismissal has several reasons, two of which are especially important. First, incorporating these deities into internal alchemy would require a virtually unfeasible re-mapping of the internal pantheon on a different cosmological model. Moreover, it would not be possible to represent by means of deities, either internal or external, the reintegration of each ontologic stage into the previous one, and even less so the return to Non-Being (*wu* 無) or Emptiness (*xu* 虛). The only, but important, exception is the innermost deity, namely the Red Child. When he reappears in internal alchemy, however, the Red Child is not anymore a deity possessed by all human beings: he is an image of the Elixir generated by means of the alchemical practice.

Within this new and more complex context, the physical body continues to perform the same function seen above: a support for the representation of a metaphorical body—now containing the ingredients, the tripod, the stove, and even the fire—which in turn opens the gate to the knowledge of the “true” body. Different sources, however, emphasize the “materiality” of the body or its “symbolism” to varying degrees; overlooking these differences can easily lead to generic descriptions of the “alchemical body” that, while valuable, combine elements pertaining to different views of internal alchemy but do not precisely reflect any of them. In fact, as we shall see in the final section, even the brief account found below, which focuses only on a few of the main features, cannot be deemed to be exemplary of the tradition as a whole.⁴

The Three Treasures

Just like the ingredients of the external elixirs are the lowest and humblest components of nature—lifeless stones and metals—which the alchemist gifts with the perfection of gold, so internal alchemy begins with the basic constituents of the cosmos and the human being in order to revert them to their original, perfect state. These constituents are the “three treasures” (*sanbao* 三寶): Essence (*jing*), Breath (*qi*), and Spirit (*shen*). Each has two values, with regard to their precosmic natures and the forms that they take on in the manifested world.⁵

In their precosmic aspects, Spirit, Breath, and Essence (in this order) represent three consecutive stages in the process of self-manifestation of Dao, from the initial state of non-being and emptiness to the coagulation of the Essence that finally generates the “ten thousand things.” In the manifested world, the three components take on different aspects. With

⁴ This account does not include the views of female alchemy (*nüdan* 女丹). See Despeux 1990, 189-28; Valussi 2009.

⁵ As is well known, translations and definitions of these terms are complex. *Qi*, in particular, is also translated as “energy,” “pneuma,” “vapor,” and in several other ways. While “breath” covers some, but not all, the senses of *qi*, this translation has the advantage of preserving the correspondence between the *qi* of Dao and the *qi* of the human being, which manifests itself primarily as the breath of breathing. An example of this correspondence is found in the third verse of the poem quoted below.

regard to the human being, Spirit emerges as the mind, i.e., the “cognitive spirit” or “thinking spirit” (*shishen* 識神, *sishen* 思神); Breath appears as respiration; and the main materializations of Essence are—in addition to other liquid components of the body, such as saliva and tears—semen in males and menstrual blood in females.

A famous poem attributed to Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194-1229?) points out that the actual ingredients of the Elixir are not ordinary essence, breath, and spirit, but their “original” counterparts:

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.
(*Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 [Ten Books on the Cultivation of Reality], ch. 3)

With their focus on transcending the limitations of the cosmic domain, practitioners of internal alchemy strive to restore the ordinary essence, breath, and spirit to the “original” aspects, and to reintegrate each of them into the previous one. This leads to the attainment of the state prior of the generation of the cosmos, which is achieved through the “inversion” of the three-stage process mentioned above and constitutes, of its own, the elixir. Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290-ca. 1368) describes this process using two fundamental terms in internal alchemy, namely “following the course” (*shun* 順) and “inverting the course” (*ni* 逆):

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

What is the meaning of “following the course”? “The One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things” (*Daode jing*, sec. 42). Therefore Emptiness transmutes itself into Spirit, Spirit transmutes itself into Breath, Breath transmutes itself into Essence, Essence transmutes itself into form, and form becomes the human being.

What is the meaning of “inverting the course”? The ten thousand things hold the Three, the Three return to the Two, the Two return to the One. Those who know this Way look after their Spirit and guard their [bodily]

form. They nourish the form to refine the Essence, accumulate the Essence to transmute it into Breath, refine the Breath to merge it with Spirit, and refine the Spirit to revert to Emptiness. Then the Golden Elixir is achieved. (*Jindan dayao* 金丹大要 [Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir], ch. 4)

In this passage, "form" refers to the state of the cosmos and the human being as we know it. The *Daode jing* sentence—the main Daoist statement on the generation of the cosmos from the Dao—is seen as the model for the "inversion of the course" performed in internal alchemy: 3 (Essence, Breath, Spirit) → 2 (Breath and Spirit) → 1 (Spirit), finally leading to "emptiness" or the Dao.

Cinnabar Fields and Alchemical Stages

In its most exemplary and widespread codification, the practice consists of a preliminary phase—whose purpose is to "replenish" Essence, Breath, and Spirit—followed by the three main stages mentioned above (Despeux 1979, 48-82; Robinet 1995, 147-64; Wang Mu 2011). The three-stage pattern, however, exists in several variants, and a significant number of texts describe other patterns or do not mention any pattern at all.

The three main stages of the practice focus on the three Cinnabar Fields (Despeux 2019, 120-29), located on the front part of the body along the Function Vessel (*renmai* 任脈). On the back of the body, along the Control Vessel (*dumai* 督脈), are found three other loci called the Three Barriers (*sanguan* 三關): the Caudal Funnel (or Tail Gate, *weilü* 尾閭) in the coccyx, the Spinal Handle (or Narrow Ridge, *jiaji* 夾脊) in the middle of the spinal column (across from the heart), and the Jade Pillow (*yuzhen* 玉枕) at the level of the occipital bone (across from the mouth). The circular route formed by the conjunction of the two vessels is called River Chariot (*heche* 河車): along that route, or "river," a "chariot" transports one's Essence (*jing*) during the first stage of the practice.

The first stage is called "Refining Essence to Transmute it into Breath" (*lianjing huaqi* 煉精化氣). Its focus is the lower Cinnabar Field, which is the seat of the Essence and is placed at 1.3, 2, 2.4, 3, or 3.6 inches (*cun* 寸) below or—more correctly, according to some sources—behind the navel. The purpose of this stage is to generate a Breath made of the union of Essence and Breath. By means of repeated breathing cycles, es-

sence is circulated along the route of the above-mentioned River Chariot: it rises in the back of the body along the Control Vessel to the upper Cinnabar Field, and from there descends in the front of the body along the Function Vessel until it reaches the lower Cinnabar Field, where it finally coagulates into the first seed of the Internal Elixir.

The second stage is called “Refining Breath to Transmute it into Spirit” (*lianqi huashen* 煉氣化神). Its focus is the middle Cinnabar Field, which is found at the center of the chest according to some texts, or between the heart and the navel according to others; in general, however, it is deemed to be equivalent to the heart itself as the symbolic center of the human being. This Field is the seat of Breath and is also called Yellow Court (*huangting* 黃庭), Crimson Palace (*jiangong* 絳宮), or Mysterious-Female (*xuanpin* 玄牝, an image of the conjunction of Yin and Yang). The purpose of this stage is to generate a Spirit made of the union of the Breath obtained in the previous stage and Spirit. At the end of this stage, therefore, Essence, Breath, and Spirit are combined into one entity.

The third and final stage is called “Refining Spirit to Return to Emptiness” (*lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛). The focus now is the upper Cinnabar Field, which is located in the region of the brain. Usually called Muddy Pellet (*niwan* 泥丸), it is the seat of Spirit. The purpose of this stage is to refine the Spirit obtained in the previous stage so that one may “return to the Dao.”

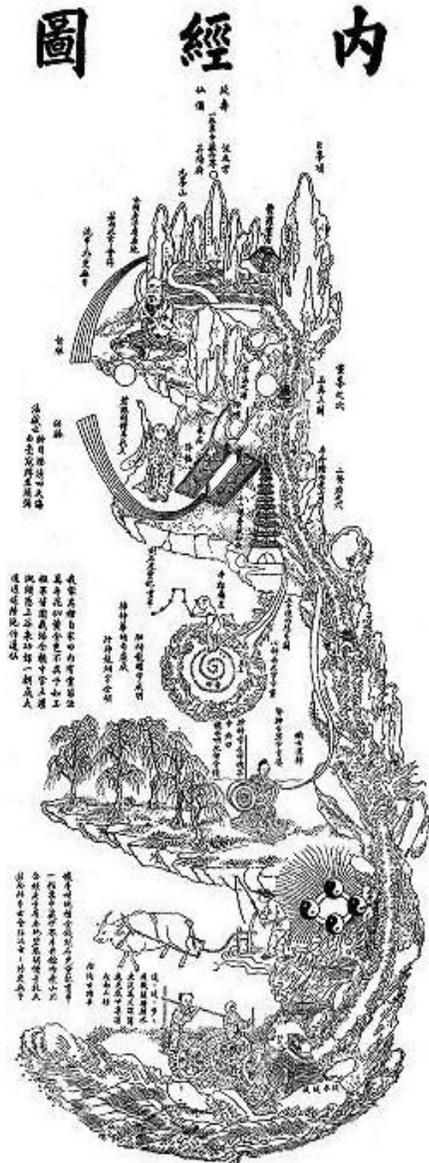
In the Daoist view, the cosmos is generated through a gestation process, where each stage “gives birth” (*sheng* 生) to the next. Similarly, internal alchemy often represents its process as the conception, gestation, and birth of an “embryo” (*tai* 胎): just like they did with regard to the inner gods, here again practitioners invest themselves with the task of “re-generating” their own persons (Despeux 2016; Steavu 2016).

When the compounding of the internal elixir is represented in this way, the first stage leads to the conception of the “embryo”; the second stage consists in its gestation; and the third stage ends with its delivery. At the end of the practice, according to a frequent locution, one gives birth to “a person outside one’s person” or “a self outside oneself” (*shen zhi wai shen* 身之外身), which personifies one’s realized state and is defined as one’s own “true person” or “realized person” (*zhenshen* 真身).

Chart of the Inner Warp

Internal alchemists have variously represented their views of the human being in pictures and charts (Despeux 2005; 2019; Neswald 2009; Huang 2012, 25-85). Best known among them is the *Neijing tu* 內經圖 (Chart of the Inner Warp), also known as *Neijing tu* 內景圖 (Chart of the Inner Landscape; Wang 1991/1992; Katō 2008; Komjathy 2008-9), whose main version is drawn on a stele dating from 1886 now found at the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (Abbey of the White Cloud) in Beijing. Like other Daoist pictures of the body, it should be "read" from the bottom upwards. The three main parts of picture, which shows a side view of the body, focus on the lower, central, and upper Cinnabar Fields, following the course of alchemical practice (see Fig. 4).

In the lower part of the image, a girl and a boy who represent Yin and Yang are working on a treadmill at the bottom of the spine. Inverting the flow of essence, depicted by the water course along the spine, they avoid that it flows downwards and is wasted.



Water, i.e., essence, thus inverts its course and is heated by a fiery furnace placed near the lower Cinnabar Field, indicated by the four Yin-Yang symbols; these stand for the four external agents (Wood, Fire, Metal, Water), with the fifth one (the central Soil) represented by their conjunction. On the left of the Cinnabar Field is the “iron buffalo plowing the earth and planting the golden coin,” an image of the first seed of the Elixir.

At the center of the picture is the middle Cinnabar Field, shaped as a spiral and located in the region of the heart. Just above it there is a child (the “true self” of the adept) who holds the constellation of the Northern Dipper, a symbol of the center of the cosmos. A remarkable aspect of this picture is the fact that the image of the child is combined with that of the Herd Boy. According to a famous Chinese tale, the Herd Boy (corresponding to the constellation Altair) only once a year can meet and conjoin with his lover, the Weaving Girl (corresponding to Vega), who is pictured below him while she works at the loom. The central Cinnabar Field is therefore seen, as in all other analogous instances in Daoism, as the center defined as the place of the conjunction of Yin and Yang.

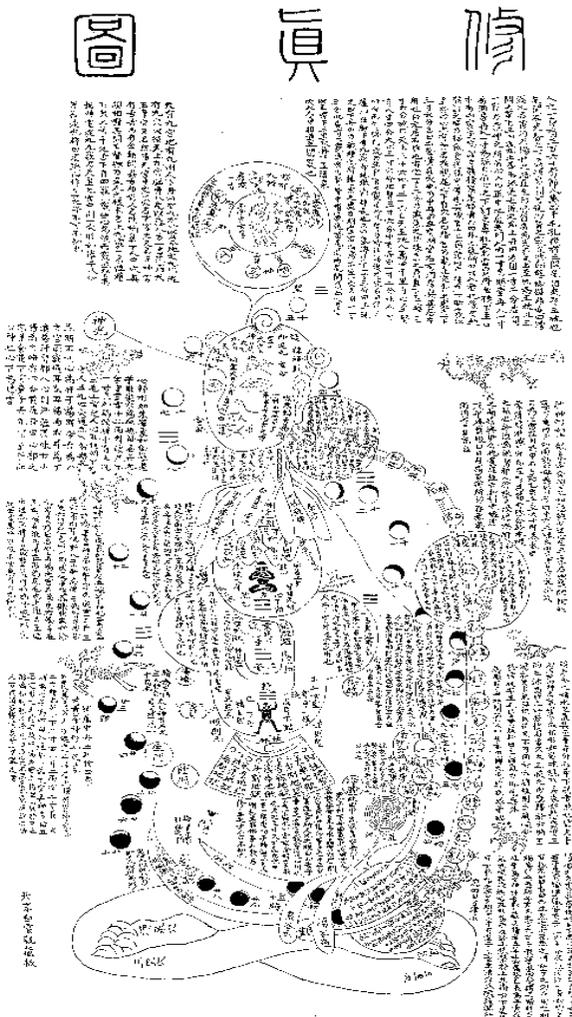
The upper part of the picture represents the upper Cinnabar Field. Behind the mountains, on the left, the Control Vessel emerges, and below it the Function Vessel begins. Together, these two vessels form the route along which the River Chariot (another image related to water) transports the essence during the first stage of the practice, first upwards in the back of the trunk, and then downwards in its front. The old man sitting next to the Control vessel is Laozi, while the monk standing next to the Function Vessel with his arms raised is Bodhidharma who, according to tradition, brought Chan Buddhism to China.

This image does not only refer to the integration of Daoism and Buddhism, which according to many masters and adepts is accomplished in internal alchemy, but also to the fact that the third and last stage of the practice, based on the upper Cinnabar Field, has a symbolic length of nine years, the same period of time that Bodhidharma spent meditating in front of a wall. The two dots stand for the eyes and represent the Sun and Moon, or, once again, Yin and Yang.

Chart for the Cultivation of Reality

The *Xiuzhen tu* 修真圖 (Chart for the Cultivation of Reality) has been transmitted in no less than twenty-five different exemplars from the early 1800s onwards (Despeux 2019). The one reproduced here is also found at the Baiyun guan, on a stele next to the *Neijing tu*. This chart, more complex than the latter, underscores cosmological elements.

The human figure, here shown in a front view, is surrounded by



thirty black and white circles that represent the days of the lunar month, and by the animal spirits of six internal organs: dragon (liver), turtle and snake (gallbladder), two-headed deer (kidneys), red sparrow (heart), white tiger (lungs), and phoenix (spleen). The trigrams arranged around the figure (Zhen ☳, Dui ☱, Qian ☰, Xun ☴, Gen ☶, and Kun ☷, the last of which is not shown in this exemplar) represent the six stages of the lunar cycle, which correspond to the six internal organs just mentioned.

In the lower part of the picture, on the left, the circle containing two small dots represents the kidneys. Below the kidneys is another circle containing eight spirals, called Pond of Lapis Lazuli (*liuchi* 琉池). The trapezium-shaped figure containing nine dots represents the nine hells. The lowest small circle, partially visible and bearing the words Jade Furnace (*yulu* 玉爐), is the lower Cinnabar Field.

In the middle of the picture, four of the leaf-like figures below the trachea represent the heart, the lungs, the liver, and the gallbladder. Each of them bears the names of seven of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The heart (the central petal) also bears the seven stars of the Northern Dipper. Below the petals are four large semicircles arranged like a cross. The upper one contains an infant sitting above the graph *qi* 炁 (Original Breath) and the trigram Li ☲ (Fire, Yang holding True Yin).

Outside the semicircle, at the level of the infant, are a monkey and a horse, which respectively represent the mind and the Intention (*yi* 意, which leads the entire alchemical process). The lower semicircle shows a standing infant, above whose head are the graph *jing* 精 (Essence) and the trigram Kan ☵ (Water, Yin holding True Yang). At the center of the cross formed by the four semicircles is the Qian ☰ trigram, representing the Elixir; this is the position of the middle Cinnabar Field.

At the top, the forehead and the nose bear names of deities and celestial locations, as well as names of other loci of the inner body; these include the Muddy Pellet (the upper Cinnabar Field) and the Celestial Eye (*tianmu* 天目, between the eyes). The rings just below—which are twelve in other versions of this chart—represent the Twelve-storied Pavilion, or trachea. An arc representing the spine begins behind the head; the twenty-four circles along this arc bear the names of the twenty-four periods of the year (*jieqi* 節氣, each lasting fifteen days). In the upper, central, and lower parts of the spine are three larger circles, correspond-

ing to the Three Barriers that the Essence must overcome along its upward circuit. The three chariots inside or besides those circles show the "chariots" that allow the Essence to go upstream. Finally, the circle above the head represents the Palace of the Muddy Pellet, i.e., the upper Cinnabar Field. At the center of the circle stands the Realized Man of Original Destiny (Yuanming zhenren 元命真人), who represents one's embodiment in the state prior to the birth of the cosmos.

The One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier

Nothing better than these two images could show that, for an adept of internal alchemy, the physical body "becomes the double, perhaps even the shadow, of his true inner body. It is no more than a field of operations, and the carnal aspect fades in front of the true identity of the 'real' (*zhen* 真) being" (Despeux 1996, 112).

The "true" and the "false" body—and the "true" and the "false" mind—are a major subject in the writings of Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734-1821), which constitute one of the main and most complete doctrinal expositions in the history of internal alchemy. His views refer to a quite different perspective on the "alchemical body." In one of his works, he states: "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" (2013, 39).

The illusory body is "the body of flesh," and the illusory mind is the mind that produces the ordinary psychological phenomena; their authentic counterparts are the "dharma-body" and the "celestial mind" (2013, 40). The dharma-body (*fashen* 法身), a term that in Buddhism means the true but unmanifested body of the Buddha, free from both birth and death, is the foundation of one's Existence (*ming* 命), one's embodiment as an individual being. The celestial mind (*tianxin* 天心) is the foundation of one's Nature (*xing* 性), which in certain alchemical traditions, analogously to Chan Buddhism, is deemed to be innately awakened.

According to Liu Yiming, the awareness of the "true" body and mind is lost in the ordinary state of being: ". . . the dharma-body is buried and the illusory body takes charge, the celestial mind retires from its

position and the human mind takes power” (id., 41). In his view, the function of internal alchemy consists in making it possible to attain “the utmost of quiescence,” which is a property of the celestial mind, and to “deliver the dharma-body,” which is the alchemical embryo and the true immortal body (id., 62).

The dharma-body and the celestial mind are conjoined in the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier (*xuanguan yiqiao* 玄關一竅), the non-spatial center of the human being. Many of its alternative names—such as Door of Yin and Yang, Altar of the Dragon and the Tiger, Opening of the Turtle and Snake, Opening of Nature and Existence, and Barrier of Birth and Death—allude to the conjunction of the opposites.

Although one is bound to describe it as a “place,” Liu Yiming emphasizes that the One Opening is devoid of dimension; he notes that different Daoist traditions have identified it with one or another part of the physical or non-physical body—including the mouth, the nose, the point between the eyebrows, the fontanel, the sinciput, the throat, the heart, the navel, and the different Cinnabar Fields—but he concurs with earlier Neidan masters in saying: “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?” (id., 101-2). Liu Yiming further adds:

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. (2013, 104)

The whole alchemical work, therefore, occurs in this spaceless center. Yet, the One Opening of the Mysterious Barrier is not part of the “alchemical body”: it is the place where even the “alchemical body” disappears.

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