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THE BOOK OF THE NINE ELIXIRS

An Early Chinese Alchemical Text

translated and annotated by Fabrizio Pregadio

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Introduction

The Taiqing (Great Clarity) Tradition

As shown by passages of the *Zhuangzi*, the *Huainan zi*, and other early texts, the term *taiqing*, or “great clarity,” originally denoted the inner spiritual state of the Taoist adept. From the third or the fourth century onward, it also came to designate the Heaven that grants revelation of alchemical doctrines and scriptures, and by extension the main early tradition of Waidan (External Alchemy).

In chapter 4 of his *Baopu zi* (Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature), Ge Hong (283-343) quotes from, or summarizes, three scriptures that formed the core of the Taiqing tradition: the *Book of Great Clarity* (*Taiqing jing*), the *Book of the Nine Elixirs* (*Jiudan jing*), and the *Book of the Golden Liquor* (*Jinye jing*). These writings are entirely or partially preserved in the Taoist Canon (*Daozang*). The second and the third one are entirely extant; the first one is preserved only in part.

According to Ge Hong and other sources, the Taiqing corpus originated at the end of the second century CE with revelations obtained by Zuo Ci. Ge Hong’s work shows how the alchemical disciplines interacted with the local practices of Jiangnan (southeastern China), especially those involving the use of talismans and the ingestion of herbal drugs for exorcistic and therapeutic purposes. The Taiqing elixirs shared with them the power of keeping away demons and harmful spirits that cause illnesses. Besides this, other purposes of ingesting the elixirs in the Taiqing tradition include achieving immortality, receiving protection from major and minor deities, and acquiring magical powers.

Consistent with this background, the alchemical process is described in the Taiqing sources as a sequence of ritual actions marked by invocations and offerings to divine beings. Its main stages are the transmission from master to disciple, the establishment of the ritual area, the choice of an auspicious time, the compounding of the elixir, its offering to the gods, and its ingestion. It is this entire process, and not only the compounding of the elixirs, that constitutes the alchemical practice. No Taiqing source, on the other hand, describes the alchemical process using the patterns, imagery, and language of Chinese cosmology and its system of correspondences. The few instances of methods related

to simple cosmological configurations—e.g., those based on five ingredients, related to the *wuxing* (five agents)—are not typical of the tradition as a whole, whose methods are characterized by the use of a large number of ingredients with no clear relation to cosmological principles.

The Taiqing tradition progressively declined from the Tang period, paralleling the rise in importance of the *Zhouyi cantong qi* (Token of the Unity of the Three in Accordance with the *Book of Changes*). No original Taiqing text appears to have been written after the Six Dynasties.

The Book of the Nine Elixirs

The *Book of Nine Elixirs* is one of the few extant sources that describe a whole Waidan practice, from the preliminary rituals to the ingestion of the elixir. The primary extant version of this work is found in the first chapter of the *Huangdi jiu ding shendan jingjue* (Instructions on the Book of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor), where it is followed by a commentary in nineteen chapters. A slightly variant version is found in the *Jiuzhuan liuzhu shenxian jjudan jing* (Book of the Flowing Pearl in Nine Cycles and the Nine Elixirs of the Divine Immortals), where the entire text is arranged as a commentary to the heptasyllabic verses of an anonymous “*Jiudan ge*” (Songs of the Nine Elixirs). This version dates from the late Six Dynasties or the beginning of the Tang period (ca. sixth or seventh centuries).

The main version, translated here, opens with an introduction on the revelation of the methods, the properties of the elixirs, and various ritual rules. This is followed by methods for making two preliminary compounds, namely the Mud of the Six-and-One (*liuyi ni*, used for luting the crucible and avoiding dispersion of “breath” during its heating) and the Mysterious and Yellow (*xuanhuang*, a lead-mercury compound used either for luting the crucible together with the Mud of the Six-and-One, or as the upper and lower layers within the crucible, together with the elixir ingredients). Then come the methods of the Nine Elixirs, which are independent preparations related to one another by their compounding techniques, rather than their ingredients.

The nineteen-chapter commentary describes various aspects of the alchemical practice, mainly through quotations from other works. Citations of texts, mentions of person and place names, use of measures of weight and volume, respect of tabooed characters, and other details show that it dates from between 649 and 686 and that it was first addressed to a sovereign, almost certainly Tang Gaozong (r. 649-83). About half of the commentary is devoted to the general principles of the alchemical doctrines (revelation of the scriptures, transmission of texts and methods, choice of time, arrangement and protection of space, relation of Waidan to other practices), while the other half contains a large selection of alchemical methods based on about two dozen substances.

The Mud of the Six-and-One

The Mud of the Six-and-One (*liuyi ni*) is a core element in the *Book of the Nine Elixirs* and other early Waidan sources. Several texts belonging or related to the Taiqing corpus describe methods to prepare this substance, sometimes calling it Divine Mud (*shenni*). Usually obtained from seven ingredients, the mud is used to hermetically seal the crucible and avoid dispersion of “breath” (*qi*) during the heating of the elixir. The earliest method to compound it is found in the *Book of the Nine Elixirs*, where the ingredients are alum, Turkestan salt, lake salt, arsenolite, oyster shells, red clay, and talc. These ingredients are pounded, sieved, and placed in an acetic bath.

About the meaning of the term “six-and-one”, the commentary to the *Book of the Nine Elixirs* merely says that “six and one is seven: the sages keep this secret, and therefore call it Six-and-One,” adding that the compound has this name even if it is obtained from a different number of ingredients (7.5a). Although no Waidan text gives an explanation clearer than this, at least two interpretations of the expression “Six-and-One” are possible. First, numbers 1 and 6 are related to Heaven and Earth, respectively. Second, some early texts, including the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainan zi*, describe or allude to the generation of the cosmos as a process that takes place in seven stages. One passage of the *Zhuangzi* (chapter 7), in particular, represents the shift from chaos to cosmos as seven holes pierced in the gourdlike body of Emperor Hundun (Chaos) by the Emperors of the North and South, emblems of duality. While the Emperors of the

North and South intend to turn Hundun into a human being, they actually caused his death, which is equivalent to the birth of the cosmos.

Transposed to the alchemical process, the seven ingredients of the Mud of Six-and-One symbolically close those seven openings, recreating the original inchoate state within the crucible and allowing the ingredients of the elixir to return to their timeless condition of *prima materia*, and to be a representation of the “essence” (*jing*) issued from the Dao to generate the cosmos.

On this Translation

The text translated below is found in the first chapter of the *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue* (Instructions on the Book of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor). This and other works on the Nine Elixirs are referred to in my comments as follows:

Jiudan jingjue *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, chapters 2–20

“Secret Instructions” “Jiuding dan yin wenjue,” in *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, 20.7a–15b

Book of the Liquid Pearl *Jiuzhuan liuzhu shenxian jiudan jing*

References to page numbers in the text found in the Taoist Canon (*Daozang*) are given in brackets within the translation. Passages indented and within parentheses, introduced by “NOTE,” are editorial notes found in the *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, often without formal distinction from the main text. My comments are printed in smaller type.

This translation is based on the one found in my *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China* (Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 159-87.

Fabrizio Pregadio
April 2011

Translation

[1a] The Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) received the Perfect Way of the Reverted Elixirs from the Mysterious Woman (Xuannü), who is a celestial woman. The Yellow Emperor compounded and ingested them, and thereby rose to Heaven as an immortal.

The Mysterious Woman announced to the Yellow Emperor:

All those who want to live a long life, but do not obtain the Divine Elixirs (*shendan*) and the Golden Liquor (*jinye*), merely bring suffering upon themselves. Practicing breathing and *daoyin*, exhaling the old and inhaling the new breath, and ingesting medicines of herbs and plants can extend the length of one's life, but do not allow one to escape death.

Daoyin (lit., “guiding and pulling”) is a form of gymnastic bases on postures that favor the circulation of breath.

When a man ingests the Divine Elixirs, he becomes a divine immortal and transcends the generations [of mortals]. He will be coeternal with Heaven and Earth, and as luminous as the Sun and the Moon; seated, he will see ten thousand miles away, and will have gods and demons at his service. He will rise into the Void with his whole family, and will fly even though he has no wings. Mounting the clouds and steering a chariot pulled by dragons, he will roam in the Great Clarity (Taiqing) and in one instant will tour the eight poles. He will not halt in front of a river, and will not fear the hundred poisons.

The states of Eternal Man and Man of Light are mentioned together in several works. Guangcheng zi, the master of the Yellow Emperor, states for instance in the *Zhuangzi* (chapter 11): “I am as luminous as the Sun and the Moon, and am coeternal with Heaven and Earth”. According to the *Huainan zi* (Book of the Master of Huainan, chapter 20), “the Great Man merges his virtue with Heaven and Earth, and merges his light with the Sun and the Moon.” Great Clarity is the Heaven that grants the revelation of the alchemical scriptures. The eight poles represent the totality of the world as well as its farthest reaches. In the *Zhuangzi*, similarly to the *Nine Elixirs*, the saintly man “rides the vapors of the clouds” and “journeys beyond the Four Seas” (chapters 1 and 2). In Daoism, as in other doctrines, space is an image for the non-dual state.

The Yellow Emperor transmitted this Way to the Mysterious Master (Xuanzi), and admonished him saying:

This Way is of supreme importance, and can be transmitted only to those who are worthy of it. Let it not be disclosed to those who are not fit to receive it, even if [Ib] they collect heaps of gold as high as mountains, or if they own ten thousand miles of land. Obtaining just one of these elixirs is enough to become an immortal: it is not required to obtain all nine of them.

Rules for the transmission. Throw a golden figurine of a man weighing nine ounces and a golden figurine of a fish weighing three ounces into an east-flowing stream, and utter an oath. Both should be provided by the one who receives this Way. Before this, undertake the purification practices (*zhai*) and perform the ablutions (*muyu*). On the banks of the stream, in a place unfrequented by other people, arrange a seat for the Mysterious Woman. Burn some incense and announce to Heaven: “I wish to transmit the Way to obtain a long life to (name of the recipient)!” Lay the *Book of the Elixirs* on a stand, and place the seat [for the Mysterious Woman] there.

The seat is the place where the divinity comes to observe the ceremony. After “Lay the Book of the Elixirs,” the *Liquid Pearl*, I.3b, adds: “and the tokens for the covenant.”

When you are ready to transmit the Way, face north and do not disclose it for one [double] hour. If the sky is clear and there is no wind, the Way can be transmitted. [Master and disciple] seal their covenant by drinking together some blood of a white chicken. Transmit the oral instructions and the essentials of the compounding of the elixirs, and throw the golden figurines of the man and the fish into the stream. This is done so that the multitudes of those who are not suited for becoming a divine immortal never see this Way.

In the *Huainan zi*, 3.2a, wind is said to be a sign of the anger of Heaven. “Those who are not suited for becoming a divine immortal” is literally “those who do not have the bones of a divine immortal,” i.e., who do not have an inner constitution fit to obtain immortality.

Place the crucible on a three-legged iron stand, so that it is nine inches over the ground. Heat it over a fire of horse manure or chaff, which should be kept five inches from the bottom of the crucible. Keep the fire low for nine days and nine nights, then increase it so that it reaches the lower crucible, for nine more days and nights. Constantly keep a damp cloth on the crucible, so that the Medicine does not volatilize, and check the cloth, dampening it again when it becomes dry. After eighty-one days altogether you can extinguish the fire.

The reading “eighty-one days” appears to be correct even though one would expect “eighteen days.” This is suggested by the *Liquid Pearl*, I.15b, which has “nine times nine, that is, eighty-one days,” and specifies “as in the method for compounding the Flower of Cinnabar.” Here too, the text describes only one part of the heating process. If, on the contrary, “eighteen days” is correct, the method described here would be similar to the one for compounding the Second Elixir, in which heating takes place in nine cycles of one day each, turning the crucible upside down at the end of each cycle and repeating the whole process twice.

Let the crucible cool for one day and open it. [I0b] The Medicine will have entirely sublimated, and will adhere to the upper crucible. The crucible will emit [vapors of] the five colors. The method of sublimation is always the foundation for compounding the Medicines.

Brush the crucible with a chicken’s feather to collect the elixir, and add to it the Flower of Hundred Plants (*baicao hua*).

Flower of Hundred Plants is a synonym of honey; compare Flowery Nectar of Hundred Plants (*baihui huoli*) in *Shiyao erya*, I.5a.

Ingest it with pure water from a well. In one hundred days, vermilion birds and male and female phoenixes will circle above you, and Divine Men and Jade Women will appear. In two hundred days you will rise to Heaven and enter the earth, and the immortals will become your attendants. In one year the Great One (*Taiyi*) will welcome you in a chariot of clouds pulled by dragons and horses.

After “ingest it,” the *Liquid Pearl*, I.15b, adds “lying inside a cave.”

When a man ingests this elixir, he will never be hungry or thirsty. Even if he is one hundred years old, he will drink only water from a spring and will feed himself only on two dozen dates and chestnuts, or on a five-inch piece of dried meat of ox or mutton. Moreover, if you smear coins with the Reverted Elixir and use them to buy something, all those coins will return to you on that very day.

This property of the Reverted Elixir is associated with the word *huan* (to revert, to return) that forms its name.

And if you smear the eyes of a person or the walls of a city with the Reverted Elixir, the hundred demons will flee.

One speck of this Medicine and one pound of powdered quicksilver will immediately form gold when they are heated.

(NOTE: According to another method, if you add Grease of Dragons to this Medicine, and heat it for nine days and nine nights, it will form true gold.)

The method referred to by the editor of the *Nine Elixirs* is described in the *Liquid Pearl*, I.16a.

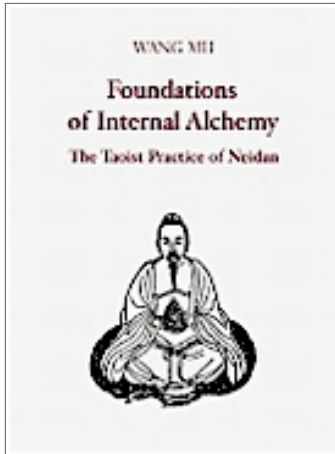
[Fifth Elixir: Elixir in Pellets]

[I 1a] The Fifth Divine Elixir is called Elixir in Pellets (*erdan*). Take one pound of mercury, and put it in a crucible of the Six-and-One.

According to the “Secret Instructions,” 20.14b, the inner part of the crucible must first be luted with a mud of Mysterious and Yellow.

Then take one pound of Imperial Man (realgar), pound it until it becomes powder-like, and cover the mercury with it. Then take one pound of Leftovers of the Food of Yu (*yu yuliang*, hematite), pound it until it becomes powder-like, and cover the Imperial Man with it. Close the crucible with another crucible of

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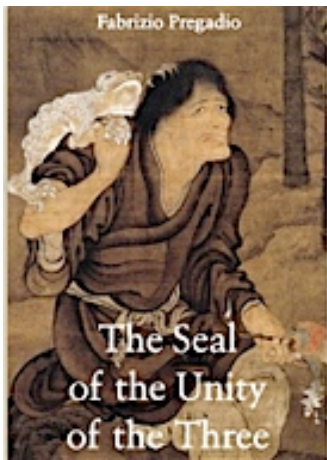


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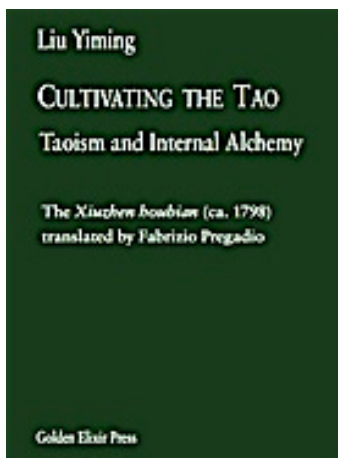
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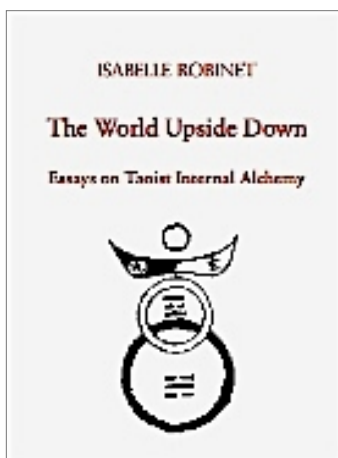


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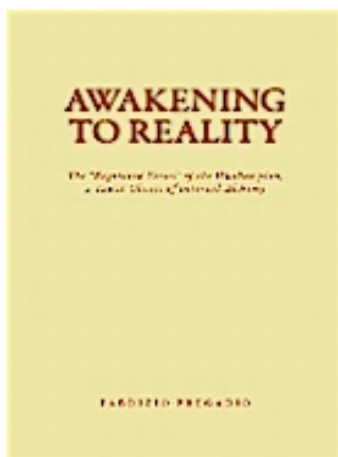


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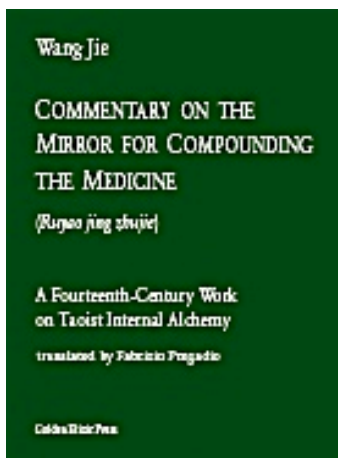
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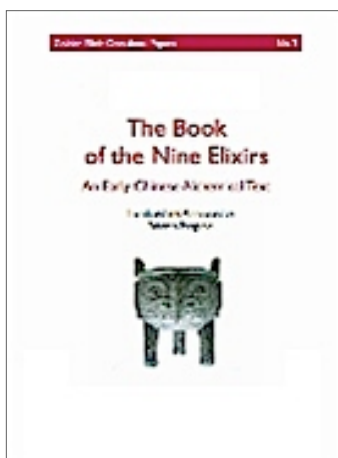


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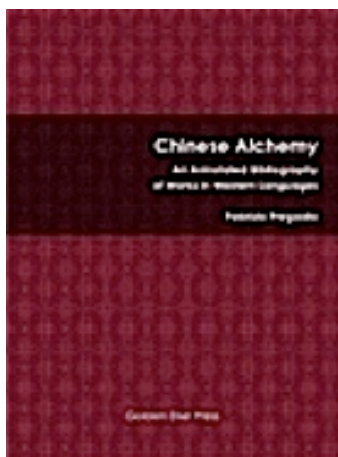


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