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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WOMEN IN DAOISM*

CATHERINE DESPEUX

DESCRIPTION

Since the beginnings of organized Daoism in the Han, women have been present and active in the different schools of the religion. In the tradition of the Celestial Masters, when married to the Master himself, they were known as "female masters" (*nüshi* 女士); when members of the chosen or seed people (*zhongmin* 種民), they carried the title "female officer" (*nüguan* 女官). As such, they received registers and talismans and participated in sexual and other practices. In the school of Highest Clarity, women were most often solitary practitioners who lived in centers of either mixed gender or women only, but some were also leaders of women's communities. They were called "female Daoists" (*nü daoshi* 女道士) or "female hats" (*nüguan* 女冠), because the only difference in their ritual garb was their distinctive headdress. In more recent times, and especially since the founding of the Complete Perfection school, women have been residents of convents or have led a devout lay religious life, qualifying in either case as "ladies of the Dao" (*daogu* 道姑).

The positions and roles of women in Daoist organizations have to be understood in relation to their situation in Chinese society in general. This has changed little over time, and in the most general manner can be characterized by submission to men, notably husbands, demanded of all women along with the high respect accorded to mothers of sons (see van Gulik 1961). Women have also not been very active in Chinese social institutions, and their roles in Daoist organizations were strictly limited. In both secular literature and Daoist texts, works by or about women are therefore the exception rather than the rule.

On the other hand, women came into their own in Daoism through several schools' belief in their greater aptitude for transcendence and for

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* Translated by Livia Kohn.

communication with the divine and invisible worlds. Frequently women serve as intermediaries, transmit texts and methods, and are often granted scriptures, especially when they have eschewed all contact with men. Similarly, women's special abilities to intercede with the gods and to fulfil the vows of the faithful render them more efficacious and powerful practitioners than men.

Who, then, were the women who embraced the Daoist path? According to a Six Dynasties' text, the Celestial Masters distinguished five different classes of women suited to become Daoist practitioners: young unmarried girls, women unable to marry due to an inauspicious horoscope, women forced into marriage, widows and rejected wives (see Despeux 1986, 63-67; Overmyer 1991, 99-101). All these were unenviable classes, rejected by society, to which the Celestial Masters offered a form of escape and an alternative. Such a status allowed these women to have at least some role and not be excluded completely. The same pattern also holds true for other periods and other Daoist schools, with one exception: under the Tang many women of aristocratic background became Daoist nuns after being widowed, some young girls spent time in Daoist convents to purify their lives before entering society, and some women spent a purifying interlude between marriages in a Daoist institution.

Daoist temples also offered refuge to women plagued by court intrigues and political machination. In addition to women practitioners, there were a number of major goddesses who played a key role in the religion, most prominently Xiwang mu (Queen Mother of the West), Laozi's mother and Mazu (the protectress of fishermen and merchants). Several women, moreover, are credited with the founding of an entire Daoist tradition, most notably Wei Huacun at the beginning of Highest Clarity and Zu Shu, the matriarch of Pure Subtlety. Writings concerning women, then, consist of hagiographic accounts of their lives, descriptions of specific practices for women and writings by women Daoists themselves. In terms of practice, their main activities lay in the areas of intermediation and shamanic communication, but they were also key participants in sexual rituals and longevity techniques.

History

HAN AND BEFORE. The earliest and most prominent female Daoist is the goddess **Xiwang mu** 西王母, queen of the immortals and symbol of highest yin. A beauty without equals, she reigns on Mount Kunlun 崑崙山, a paradisical residence of the immortals covered by luxuriant orchards growing the peaches of immortality. This, at least, is the best known image of the goddess who took on a number of specifically female traits and, under

the Han, became the spouse of Dongwang gong 東王公, the Lord King of the East, also known as Mugong 木公 (Lord of Wood) and the representative of pure yang. Beyond that, Xiwang mu is known for multiple aspects that make her a demoness in addition to a goddess.

Especially before the Han dynasty she appears in various distinct aspects. For one, she was a cosmic demiurge, a primordial creator of yin and yang, presenting herself as androgynous and complete (Seidel 1982, 99-106). For another, her title appears as a geographical name, used for a country or region in the west (see Fracasso 1988). A passage in the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas) of the third century B.C.E. describes her as having a human body, a leopard's tail and tiger's teeth. She wears a characteristic square headdress in her dishevelled hair and makes strange, whistling sounds (Mathieu 1983, 1:101; see also Chan 1990). These same characteristics appear in other early descriptions of the goddess, which also mention further traits, such as the black bird who serves as her familiar, her special relation with the orchard of immortality peaches, and her visit to Emperor Wu of the Han on the seventh day of the seventh month, a date associated with popular exorcistic practices. All these go back to traditions of shamanism and the ancient popular religion (Despeux 1990, 46-47). Most certainly it was this shamanic connection which made her appear under the Han as the goddess of epidemics who resided in the west and ruled over the demons of pestilence (Seidel 1982, 99-106).

In the Warring States period, Xiwang mu was further linked with the idea of longevity (e.g., in the *Zhuangzi*), a notion that grew significantly under the Han, when the quest for immortality made up for certain deficiencies in the cosmology of the time (Loewe 1979, 96-98). The quest certainly played a large role in the thinking of Emperor Wu, maybe even more than in that of his predecessor, the First Emperor of the Qin. In 110 B.C.E., on the seventh day of the seventh month, Emperor Wu received a visit from Xiwang mu, joined her in a banquet that included immortality peaches and received several revealed texts and potent talismans from her. Told first in the *Han wudi neizhuan* 漢武帝內傳 (Inner Biography of the Han Emperor Wu, CT 292; see Schipper 1965; Smith 1992), a text linked with the Highest Clarity school, this episode comes first in orthodox hagiography of the goddess, composed by Du Guangting 杜光庭 (855-930) in his *Yongcheng jixian lu* 墉城集仙錄 (Record of the Assembled Immortals in the Heavenly Walled City, CT 783; see Cahill 1986a; 1993; Kominami 1991). Placing her in the first scroll of his work, Du shows the continued centrality and importance of the goddess.

After becoming, in 3 B.C.E., the leading goddess in one of the first known popular movements (Shek 1987, 532), Xiwang mu was worshiped variously in the different regions of China, her cult being pronounced on Mount Heng 衡山, the sacred mountain of the south. In addition, she had

major sanctuaries on Mount Hua 華山 near modern Xi'an, where her tomb was said to be located, and on Mount Wuyi 武夷山 (Fujian), which is mentioned variously in connection with her. Under the Six Dynasties, her cult was integrated into the pantheon of Highest Clarity and she became one of the key goddesses of this school. While, as Du Guangting points out, she was a helper of both sexes at this time, under the Tang she emerged particularly as the protectress of women—of female Daoists, aristocratic ladies, singers, widows and nuns (see Cahill 1986b; 1988). Nevertheless, she was also a goddess highly adored by men and received many eulogies and admiring songs from Tang poets (over 500 in all). She was, most certainly, a model lady and representative of the female ideal (see Cahill 1993).

Since the Song, Xiwang mu's cult in official Daoism has been increasingly supplanted by that of other goddesses. She has nevertheless continued to be a major figure in sectarian movements and small congregational groups who often receive messages from her through spirit-writing. Descending onto the altar during séances, under the Ming and Qing she took on the title **Wusheng laomu** 無生老母 (Neverborn Venerable Mother; see Overmyer and Jordan 1986), thus playing a major role in popular cults and remaining a key goddess worshiped by women.

Structually, the goddess is part of the overall Chinese tendency to classify the world in a hierarchical system based on the family structure and on the administration of the empire. As a result, Xiwang mu is both classical mother and chief of the celestial administration. In the heavenly paradises, she is surrounded not only by primordial princesses (*yuanjun* 元君) who also appear as the divine spouses of Highest Clarity visionaries, but also by celestial maidens (*tiannü* 天女) and jade maidens (*yunü* 玉女), including also junior goddeses of time, the Six Jia (Liujia 六甲; see Inoue 1992). She transmits sacred texts and immortality methods, serving as a symbol of sexual communication between above and below, the visible and the invisible. She legitimates the ruler's pursuit of immortality; she serves as the patroness of all women, ancient and modern, who wish to be delivered from evil and cured from diseases; and she is a key figure in sectarian movements, high goddess of Daoism and popular religion.

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES. Under the Han dynasty, when the first organized Daoist movements developed, women served as wives of masters and as female officers among the chosen people. They became more prominent with the emergence of the Highest Clarity school in the fourth century, which had a woman as first matriarch. **Wei Huacun** 魏華存 (252-334, from Rencheng 任城, Shandong) was the daughter of Wei Shu 魏舒, minister of public instruction under Emperor Wu of the Western Jin (r. 265-290) and an adept of the Way of the Celestial Master. Married to a leading Celestial Masters officer, Wei Huacun became a libationer (*jijiu* 祭酒) herself, which means that she received a thorough religious education in the

organization, including also sexual rites of passage and the reception of formal registers which allowed her to fulfill her official duties. During the war that led to the beginning of the Eastern Jin in 317, her family survived by fleeing to Jianye (modern Nanjing), after which she spent much of her life in seclusion, receiving several visits from celestial perfected (*zhenren* 真人) of high rank.

According to her hagiography, she attained the Dao on the southern marchmount (Mount Heng) in Hunan, which at the time was a highly active center of both Buddhist and Daoist practices (see Faure 1987; Robson 1995). She was accordingly called Nanyue furen 南嶽夫人 (Lady of the Southern Marchmount) and appears as such in a letter of Yang Xi 楊羲, dated between 384 and 399. After this time, she became the object of an important cult which, especially under the Tang (see Schafer 1977) became prominent among women Daoists and spread to various locations in China (see Despeux 1990, 56-60; Strickmann 1979, 142; Robinet 1984, 2: 392). Under the Song, she joined the pantheon of yet another Daoist tradition, similarly founded by a woman patriarch, the school of Pure Subtlety (Qingwei dao 清微道).

THE TANG. In Highest Clarity, women were present as initiators, preceptors and possessors of sacred texts and methods. Under the auspices of this school, which became the pinnacle of integrated Daoism under the Tang, women reached their most prominent position in the religion. This was actively supported by Emperor Xuanzong (r. 713-756), whose passions for women and Daoism extended to women Daoists. According to the statistics taken by the Daoist administration of the time, there were 1,687 Daoist temples in the eighth century, 1,137 for men and 550 for women (Despeux 1986, 55). Women thus constituted an important part of the Daoist clergy as it was recognized officially.

One event in particular marks the heightened role of women Daoists in the Tang: the **ordination of two princesses**, the eighth and ninth daughters of Emperor Ruizong (r. 710-713) in 711, known as the princesses of Xining 西寧 and Changlong 昌隆. After being ordained in the Cavern-Mystery level of the religion, they became Jinxian gongzhu 金仙公主 (Princess of Golden Transcendence) and Yuzhen gongzhu 玉真公主 (Princess of Jade Perfection; see Benn 1991; Schafer 1978a; 1985). Their entry into the Daoist path was celebrated with unheard of splendor which cost the state coffers a fortune. Despite the criticism of various ministers and high functionaries regarding the extreme expense (see Despeux 1986), the emperor also ordered the construction of two monasteries for his princesses, located in the Fuxing 輔興 ward of Chang'an, right next to the imperial concubines. Alleys and pathways between the two temples and the palace were open and easily accessible.

The ordination proper took fourteen days and nights, as is reported by the ritualist Zhang Wanfu 張萬福, himself a participant, in his *Chuanshou sandong jingjie falu lueshuo* 傳授三洞經戒法籙略說 (Synopsis of the Transmission of the Scriptures, Precepts, Methods, and Registers of the Three Caverns, CT 1241, 2.18a-21a; see Benn 1991, 148-51; Ren and Zhong 1991, 982), dat. 713. It was no different from ordinations undergone by aristocratic men, except that since men were associated with yang and thus the left side, many of their ritual actions would begin on the left, while those of women, associated with yin and with the right side, started with the right. The Ming text *Shoulu cidi fa xinyi* 受籙次第法信儀 (Ordinances on Order and Rank in Ordination, CT 1244), for example, specifies that when a man and a woman receive registers of three generals at the altar, the man takes it with his left, the woman with her right (17b). Or again, that the master takes the left hand of the man but the right hand of the woman.

Zhang Wanfu does not describe the ritual garb worn by the princesses, but it must have been similar to garments known from other Tang ordinations. It was a most elaborate outfit, representing the new, divine identity of the ordinand and his or her integration into the cosmic order. It served to render the divine world visible and allow communication with it. It also guaranteed the adept access to transcendence and formed a veritable suit of armor against all sorts of demons and malicious influences. Each of the seven levels of ordination under the Tang (see Benn 1991, 73-98) had a specific ritual garb associated with it. Those of the first five levels showed minute differences between the sexes, while the garb worn by adepts of the sixth and seventh levels were identical—except that the size of headdress and length of robes corresponded to a yang number for men and a yin number for women (Despeux 1990).

The two princesses with their ordination—as well as their predecessor, Princess Taiping 太平公主, the daughter of Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu who entered a Daoist convent to escape a marriage with the king of barbarian Turfan—represent a trend among imperial daughters that sent more than ten joining the Daoist path and converting their residences into convents (Schafer 1985, 1). This was unprecedented in Chinese history. Separated from society through their religious conversion, the women could yet exert a political influence, while at the same time taking refuge from the ubiquitous palace intrigues. They benefited from the economic privileges of their new status and had a great deal of personal freedom. Records show they often led a licentious life, undertook extensive travels and devoted themselves to art and literature. Passage into Daoism sometimes allowed a woman to escape an unwanted marriage (like the Princess Taiping) or to change her spouse. This was the case for one of the most celebrated women of traditional China, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃, the beloved concubine of Emperor Xuanzong. Before becoming *guifei*, "most honorable consort," she

had been married to Li Chang 李玚, one of the emperor's sons, whom she left in order to enter the imperial harem in 745 (see Schafer 1978a).

The eighth century is important not only because of the rise in aristocratic nuns, but also because it saw the integration of official Daoism with various **local cults**, which were flourishing as never before. Although never absent from the north and northwest of the country, they rose particularly in the maritime and central regions of the east and south where divine women of various sorts (goddesses of rivers and mountains, shamanesses, cultic founders) grew in stature and often became objects of pilgrimages undertaken equally by men and women (see Schafer 1973). Their diffusion and popularity depended on their recognition by official Daoism, the aristocracy and the imperial court. Their integration into the official pantheon is often presented in texts as conquests of Daoism—their voices on the issue not being heard.

Sources that speak of female Daoists praise their exceptional talents in various areas, such as painting, calligraphy, embroidery and poetry, as well as their gifts as prophets, healers and saviors. The hagiographies most frequently mention their powers to help beget male children and to heal various diseases, powers which gave birth to the major female cults which Daoism absorbed during the Six Dynasties and Tang.

One example for the development of a local cult under female auspices comes from the school of Pure Subtlety (Qingwei 清微) and its first "patriarch," the Tang priestess **Zu Shu** 祖舒 (fl. 889-904, from Lingling 零陵 in Guangxi; see Ren 1990, 565-66). After receiving ordination in the traditions of the Celestial Masters, Highest Clarity, Numinous Treasure and the *Daode jing*, she went to Guiyang 桂陽 where she met Lingguang shengmu 靈光聖母 (the Holy Mother of Numinous Radiance). The latter transmitted to her the Way of Pure Subtlety together with techniques of talismans and exorcism, typically found in thunder rites popular under the Song, and especially in the school of the Divine Empyrean (Shenxiao 神霄; see Boltz 1987). These techniques originally came from the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning residing in the Heaven of Pure Subtlety, thus the name of the school.

Later followers placed Zu Shu at the head of their patriarchal lineage, which was constructed in the thirteenth century. The first text to mention it is the *Qingwei xianpu* 清微仙譜 (Account of the Immortals of Pure Subtlety, CT 171) by Chen Cai 陳采 of the Yuan (see Boltz 1987, 38-39). According to him, the founder of the active school was Nan Bidao 南畢道 (b. 1196), who appears as its ninth patriarch. He received the key methods passed down from Zu Shu, then developed them into the Pure Subtlety system during his sojourn in the capital.

Unlike Wei Huacun, whose family background and role as libationer is known, we know nothing about Zu Shu's home. The little we do know

about her activities makes her seem more like a southern shaman than a religious visionary. Rather than an active founder, she appears in the Pure Subtlety school mainly as a preceptor who transmits methods which she herself obtained from another woman. It is notable that the school began in the south of China and that rites of healing and exorcism were central from its beginning.

THE SONG. The numbers of women Daoists declined in the early Song to about 3-5% of the registered clergy and only rose again later, with the emergence of the Complete Perfection school (Quanzhen 全真). Nevertheless, cults of women continued to flourish and there were some senior female practitioners of various techniques. Among the cults, that of **Linshui furen** 臨水夫人, "the Lady near the Waters," stands out. Originally named Chen Jinggu 陳靖姑, she was born during the Tang, in 767. Blessed by various supernatural powers, she died young and pregnant, at the age of 24, during a rain-making ritual. Her powers began to manifest after her death and she gradually grew into the protectress of women, children and boy mediums (the so-called children of divination, *jitong* 乩童).

The cult first developed in her home state of Min 閩 (Fujian), then was canonized in the Song while continuing its shamanic practices, stylizing her and her sisters as magicians, controllers of demons, exorcists and healers who could undertake shamanic travels into the other world to guide lost souls and visit the heavenly and underworldly planes. As her cult grew and established her more formally as a divinity, local Daoists and literati adopted her and her fame spread more widely. Figures involved included the Song Daoist Chen Shouyuan 陳受元 and the Ming literatus Zhang Yining 張以寧 (1301-1370)—the latter even writing a memorial on her. Later the cult became particularly prominent in Taiwan, where the Lady near the Waters served as a focal point for communities of women who refused marriage but did not wish to renounce all sexuality and instead preferred lesbian expressions (see Berthier 1988).

Among senior women practitioners, a lady later honored as the first woman to undertake inner alchemy stands out. **Cao Wenyi** 曹文逸 (fl. 1119-1125, orig. Cao Daochong 曹道沖; see Despeux 1990, 83-93), described in her biography contained in the *Luofu shanzhi* 羅浮山志 (Gazetteer of Mount Luofu; in *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 292.2b), was a renowned poetess and author of the *Dadao ge* 大道歌 (Song of the Great Dao). Her fame having reached the ears of Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1126), he called her to the capital and gave her the formal title Wenyi zhenren 文逸真人 or "Perfected of Literary Withdrawal."

Song bibliographies attest to her quality as an author and mention that she wrote commentaries to various Daoist texts, including one on the *Xisheng jing* 西昇經 (Scripture of Western Ascension, CT 726) and one, in two scrolls, on the *Daode jing*, both of which are now lost as independent

works (see Loon 1984, 104, 106). The latter remains, in fragments and citations, in a collection of twenty commentaries by Peng Helin 彭鶴林 of the Southern Song, the *Daode jing jizhu* 道德經集註 (Collected Commentaries to the *Daode jing*, CT 707; pref. 2.1b). The collection begins with an exegesis by Emperor Huizong himself and contains works by such illustrious Song scholars as Sima Guang 司馬光, Wang Anshi 王安石, Su Zhe 蘇轍, Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Ye Mengde 葉夢德. Among all these high-ranking men, Lady Cao is the sole female, described in the introduction as "Cao Daochong, mistress of tranquility and humane virtue and the perfection of the Dao." A note adds that "her secular name was Xiyun 希蘊 and she was a lady Daoist of good standing whom people called the Immortal Lady Cao 曹仙姑. The emperor gave her the title Qingxu wenyi dashi 清虛文逸大師 (Great Master of Literary Withdrawal into Pure Emptiness) and called her "Mistress of Tranquility."

Later, Lady Cao was venerated by several Qing-dynasty lineages of women's inner alchemy. This is evident in her appearances in spirit-writing séances and in various inscriptions preserved in the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Temple) in Beijing. Here one school in particular honors her as patroness: the school of Purity and Tranquility (Qingjing pai 清靜派).

While women were of lesser importance in Daoism through most of the Song, their importance rose again with the growth of the school of Complete Perfection in the late twelfth century. Its founders openly presented themselves to the aristocracy as practitioners who would save Chinese culture from the invasion and domination of barbarian hordes. As multiple references in the sources indicate, women in the school served variously as abbesses of major temples, wives or mothers of leading adepts, or key members of local associations (*hui* 會). The list of the first seven patriarchs and masters includes a woman, **Sun Bu'er** 孫不二 (1119-1182, from Ninghai 寧海 in Shandong; see Cleary 1989). Born into a powerful local family, she received a literary education and was married to Ma Yu 馬鈺, *zi* Yifu 宜甫 (1123-1183), better known as Ma Danyang 馬丹陽 and also called "Ma Who Had Half the Prefecture." The couple had three sons and lived in peaceful obscurity until 1167 when the Quanzhen founder Wang Chongyang 王重陽 visited the area. Converted to his creed, they became active disciples and Sun herself grew to be leader of the local Ninghai assocation, under the direction of the Jinlian tang 金蓮堂 (Hall of the Golden Lotus). Her merits earned her the Daoist title Qingjing sanren 清靜散人 (Serene Lady of Purity and Tranquility), the term *sanren* being unique to women of this school under the Jin and Yuan. Receiving the third and highest level of Quanzhen ordination, she became a senior leader with the right to teach and ordain other woman followers (Despeux 1990, 111-27). Her cult grew over the following dynasties.

THE MING AND QING. In the late Yuan and early Ming, women Daoists are scarcely mentioned in the sources. Rare exceptions are some wives and mothers of Celestial Masters, who had newly risen to national importance and received imperial support. No longer do we find women leaders of temples or convents of the Quanzhen or Longmen schools. Hagiographies of women are extremely rare, maybe ten short entries in local gazettes that describe more local shamanic practitioners than Daoists.

Under the Qing the situation becomes more complex because the rulers instituted a branch of Tibetan Buddhism as state religion, and forced Buddhists and Daoists to use the same institutions. Daoism at the time increasingly split into numerous subsects and local groups, among which one occasionally finds women's lineages that go back to a foundress. In this context also arose a number of texts specifically dealing with inner alchemy for women.

Among deities, on the other hand, several popular goddesses were increasingly adopted into the Daoist pantheon. One of them is the Hindu goddess Marîci, the personification of light and offspring of Brahma who resides in the Great Brahma Heaven, serves as a ruler of destiny and is a great savior of all (see Getty 1962, 132-34). In Daoism, she appears as **Doumu** 斗母, Mother of the Dipper and protectress against violence and peril. She is described in the *Doumu jing* 斗母經 (CT 621; see Franke 1977, 214) and became increasingly popular in the religion.

Then there is **Bixia yuanjun** 碧霞元君 (Goddess of the Morning Clouds), whose cult began in the Song with the discovery of a statue on Mount Tai 泰山 and who under the Ming was venerated as the daughter of the God of Mount Tai and merciful helper of the dead that pass under his judgment (Naquin 1992, 334-45). As documented in the *Bixia yuanjun huguo baosheng jing* 碧霞元君護國保生經 (Scripture on the Guarding of Life and Protection of the Country through the Goddess of the Morning Clouds, DZ 1445), she was officially integrated into the Daoist pantheon through formal empowerment by the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning, who gave her the necessary spells and talismans for helping people in a formal audience ceremony in the highest heaven.

A similar adoption into Daoism occurred in the case of the most popular of all later goddesses, **Mazu** 媽祖 or Tianfei 天妃 (Celestial Consort), the protectress of seafarers, fisherman and merchants (see Dudbridge 1978; Sangren 1983; Wädow 1992). Her cult began in the late eleventh century and, by the thirteenth, had expanded throughout the maritime provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Anhui. Born into the Lin 林 family on the island of Meizhou 湄州 (Fujian), she saved three of her brothers from shipwreck and duly became the savior of seafarers. Many aspects of her legend adopt traits of the Buddhist savior goddess Guanyin 觀音 who similarly saves mariners. Her celestial realm is located in the Northern

Dipper and she protects not only sailing fishermen but also women giving birth, farmers encountering wild animals, workers with illnesses caused by silkworms and suffering people in general.

Her adoption into the Daoist pantheon through a formal enfeoffment by Lord Lao is documented in the *Tianfei jiuku lingyan jing* 天妃救苦靈驗經 (Scripture of the Celestial Consort's Miraculous Salvation from Suffering, DZ 649) of the year 1409 (see Boltz 1986). It begins with the astral origins of the goddess, then summarizes her worldly life, invokes her divinity, and describes heavenly nature. After this, Mazu receives her official mandate from Lord Lao, who commands her "to descend and be incarnated in the mortal realm so that she might rescue humankind from the hardships suffered" (Boltz 1986, 223).

Today Mazu has two major sanctuaries in mainland China (in Tianjin and Quanzhou), 510 temples in Taiwan, and 40 in Hong Kong. Most of the latter are run by emigrants from Fujian who brought the cult with them (Wiethoff 1966, 311-57).

Texts

HAGIOGAPHIES. Typically hagiographies contain accounts of the lives of both men and women, the latter being distinctly in the minority (see "Immortality and Transcendence"). There are, however, two collections that specify on the lives of female Daoists, both from periods when women's practice flourished.

Yongcheng jixian lu 墉城集仙錄 (Record of the Assembled Immortals in the Heavenly Walled City, CT 783, *Yunji qiqian* 114-16; 6 j.), by Du Guangting 杜光庭, dat. 913 (see Cahill 1986a; 1993). This collection presents information on women who have attained perfection and are honored particularly in the texts and rites of Highest Clarity. According to the author's preface, the text contained originally ten *juan* and 109 biographies. Two separate versions survive today, the one in the Daoist canon having 37 biographies and that in the *Yunji qiqian* having 28, of which only two are identical. Several biographies are contained in neither version, but can be recovered from encyclopedias, such as the *Taiping guangji*. Thus we have about two thirds of the original 109 at our disposal. Much information contained in them, moreover, goes back to Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 *Zhen'gao* 真誥 (Declarations of the Perfected, CT 1016) of the year 500 (see Strickmann 1981, 39).

In his preface Du Guangting emphasizes that, according to Highest Clarity teachings, the Primordial Father (Yuanfu 元父) and the Metal Mother (Jinmu 金母) are in charge of entering the names of male and female adepts in the registers of immortality above. The latter then come

together under the guidance of the Queen Mother of the West, protectress of the immortals of Yongcheng, the Heavenly Walled City on Mount Kunlun. This description does not imply any form of hierarchy or preference for one gender over the other, but rather shows a complementarity between the two. Both female and male adepts strive for the same goal and pursue the same path, perhaps with minor differences along the way (Cahill 1993, 214-15). In addition, one may detect here a remnant of earlier periods when worship of the Queen Mother was dominant among popular cults while Daoists focused more on the veneration of male celestial deities. The *Bowu zhi* 博物志 (Record of Ample Things) of the third century even puts the following words into Laozi's mouth: "All the people have great faith in the Queen Mother; only kings, saints, immortals, perfected and Daoists entrust their fate to the rulers of the Nine Heavens" (1.3b).

The version in the Daoist canon begins with the biography of the Holy Mother Goddess (Shengmu yuanjun 聖母元君), the mother of the divinized Laozi who not only gives birth to but also provides instruction for the newly born savior before ascending to heaven as Great Queen of Former Heaven (Xiantian taihou 先天太后; see Kohn 1989). Following this, Du provides an extensive hagiography of the Queen Mother of the West (see Cahill 1993), then moves on to that of the Mysterious Maiden of the Nine Heavens (Jiutian xuannü 九天玄女), a disciple of the Queen Mother who also served as the teacher of the Yellow Emperor. After this celestial section, the collection principally focuses on the biographies of real, living women who seriously practiced Daoism and were divinized to a greater or lesser degree. Some lived under the Han and Six Dynasties, but for the most part Du records the lives of Tang ladies and their specific efforts (see Cahill 1990). As far as can be told from the fragments of the collection, the vast majority of women presented belonged to the school of Highest Clarity. Only three extant biographies are of ladies associated with the Celestial Masters.

Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian houji 歷世真仙體道通鑑後集 (Supplement to the Comprehensive Mirror of Perfected Immortals and Those Who Have Embodied the Tao, CT 298; 6 j.), by Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1297), a Daoist of the Shengshou wannian gong 聖壽萬年宮 (Temple of Ten Thousand Years of Saintly Life) on Mount Fuyun 浮雲山. Written by a Daoist of the Complete Perfection school, this contains 120 biographies, including almost all those found in the *Yongcheng jixian lu*, and follows an order not entirely chronological. Its first *juan* has accounts of the All-Highest Goddess (Wushang yuanjun 無上元君, i.e., Laozi's mother), the Goddess of the Great One (Taiyi yuanjun 太一元君) and the Queen Mother of the West. J. 2-5 join divinities with real women, mostly of Highest Clarity but also of the Celestial Masters, Numinous Treasure and Pure Brightness (Jingming dao 淨明道) schools. J. 6 has fourteen biographies of Song women, six of whom lived under Emperor Huizong. Here we also

find an account of the life of Sun Bu'er, the saintly mistress of Complete Perfection.

WORKS WRITTEN BY WOMEN. ***Qionggong wudi neisi shangfa*** 瓊宮五帝內思上法 (Highest Methods of Visualizing the Five Emperors of the Jasper Palace) and ***Lingfei liujia neisi tongling shangfa*** 靈飛六甲內思通靈上法 (Highest Methods of Visualizing the Flying Spirits of the Six Jia to Communicate with the Divine), both by Yuzhen gongzhu 玉真公主, the Princess of Jade Perfection, dat. 738. Both texts describe meditation methods used in the Highest Clarity school and have been preserved in a Tang calligraphy by Zhong Shaojing 鐘紹京 (see Lidai beitie zu 1984). They precede, by a few years, the establishment of the "College of Daoist Studies" (*chongxuan xue* 崇玄學) in 841, in both capitals and each prefecture of the empire.

Huangting neijing wuzang liufu buxie tu 黃庭內景五臟六腑補瀉圖 (Illustrated Description of the Tonification or Dispersion of the Five Organs and Six Viscera According to the Yellow Court Scripture, CT 432, CT 263, j. 54), by Hu Yin 胡愔 (*zi* Jiansuzi 見素子, from Mount Taibai 太白山), dat. 848 (see Needham 1983, 82). This contains a discussion of the central organs in the human body (liver, heart, spleen, lungs and kidneys) as understood in the visualization tradition of the "Yellow Court Scripture." Each part presents a description of the organ in question and an outline of how to visualize absorbing its pertinent energy, as well as an analysis of relevant symptoms. In addition, the text has several sets of therapies for ailments of the organs, including the absorption of the six energies, dietary restrictions and gymnastic exercises. They match breathing and visualization techniques associated with the "Yellow Court Scripture" that were popular in the Tang. There is nothing specifically female about the practice.

Lingyuan dadao ge 靈源大道歌 (Song of the Great Dao of the Numinous Source), by Cao Wenyi 曹文逸, dat. 12th c. The attribution to Cao Wenyi is somewhat dubious, since the oldest version of the text, shorter than the most current version, is found in Zeng Cao's 曾慥 *Daoshu* 道樞 (Pivot of the Dao, CT 1017), an encyclopedia of inner alchemical texts of the year 1145 (16.1a-3b). Here the text is attributed to He Xiangu 何仙姑, the only female member of the Eight Immortals, and not to Cao Wenyi; however, Ming editions link the text with Cao (see Despeux 1990, 84). It consists of one long poem, influenced by Chan Buddhism, on inner alchemy, which does not evoke anything particularly female. Nevertheless, under the Qing its author was associated specifically with women's inner alchemical practices, and the text has accordingly been integrated into collections on the subject. It has also recently been the subject of a commentary by Chen Yingning 陳攖寧.

WORKS ON WOMEN'S INNER ALCHEMY appeared particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They include about

thirty works of uneven length, both in prose and poetry, which are for the most part undated. The earliest known date is 1743, the most recent 1892. The texts are frequently attributed to gods, both male and female, and were transmitted in spirit-writing séances held by Daoists who remain largely anonymous. Certain people's names appear, but they are mostly commentators or editors of the texts. Among female deities, Xiwang mu and Sun Bu'er appear most frequently, followed by He Xiangu (see Despeux 1990, 291-302).

Authors of compilations include Shen Qiyun 沈棲雲 (1708-1786), a disciple of the famous Min Yide 閔一得 (1758-1836) and an eleventh generation member of the Longmen branch of Mount Jin'gai near Huzhou (Jiangxi; see Esposito 1993); He Longxiang 賀龍驤, a Quanzhen Daoist of the Qingyang gong 青羊宮 in Chengdu; Fu Jinquan 傅金銓 (1765-1845), a Jingming Daoist, member of a group established in 1817 in the Ba district of Sichuan; Yi Xinying 易心瑩 (1896-1976), a Daoist of Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan and, since 1953, the supervisor of the local Tianshi dong 天師洞 (Celestial Master's Grotto). Finally, there is Chen Yingning 陳攖寧 (1880-1969), active in Shanghai in the 1930s, who also translated Cao Wenyi's and Sun Bu'er's poetry into modern Chinese and had an active correspondence with women practitioners while heading the Daoist Studies Institute in Shanghai.

Xiwang mu nüxiu zhengtu shize 西王母女修正途十則 (Ten Rules of the Queen Mother of the West on the Proper Path of Women's Cultivation), attributed to Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, revealed by Sun Bu'er and transmitted by Shen Qiyun. The latter received the work in a spirit-writing séance held in 1799 in Wulin 武林 (Anhui). Its original title was *Nü jindan jue* 女金丹訣 (Women's Formula of the Golden Elixir); it is contained in the oldest known collection comprising works on women's alchemy, Min Yide's *Daozang xubian* 道藏續編 (Supplement to the Daoist Canon), dat. 1834. Showing some Tantric Buddhist influence, the text presents ten rules about women's practice, beginning with nine precepts specifically for women and presenting basic cultivation principles of calming the mind as well as techniques on how to intercept menstruation. The latter include breast massages, visualization of the energy pathways in the body, breathing exercises and various meditations.

Niwan Li zushi nüzong shuangxiu baofa 泥丸李祖師女宗雙修寶筏 (Precious Raft of Women's Double Cultivation According to Master Li Niwan), subtitled *Nügong zhinan* 女功指南 (A Compass of Women's Practice), by Li Niwan 李泥丸, a semi-legendary Longmen figure who, in 1795, transmitted the text spiritually to Shen Qiyun. It has a commentary by Shen and was reedited in 1830 by Min Yide. It follows the *Xiwang mu nüxiu zhengtu shize* in the *Daozang xubian*, the two texts being connected by continuous pagination.

The text consists of nine rules which systematically describe the progressive transformation of the adept's body. It begins with calming and purifying the spirit, then moves on to increasing the circulation of energy with the help of breast massages and visualization exercises. Eventually the practice leads to the accumulation of wisdom, the increase in inner emptiness and the formation of a new body of light within the adept's body. The ninth rule emphasizes that women can undertake the path while still actively pursuing household tasks and repeats the virtues they have to cultivate: filial piety, obedience toward their husbands, flexibility, softness and so on.

Nüdan hebian 女丹合编 (Collected Edition of Works on Women's Alchemy), by He Longxiang, included in the 1906 Qingyang gong edition of the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要 (Epitome of the Daoist Canon). In his preface, He Longxiang notes that he spent thirty years collecting and compiling the texts of this collection, based on the practices undertaken by the Daoist women in his family, including his wife, daughter, sister-in-law, niece, aunt and others. The materials consist of about twenty texts, between one and twenty pages in length and written in both prose and poetry. Practically all of them go back to spirit-writing séances, being attributed to major gods or immortals, including Lü Dongbin (3 texts), Sun Bu'er (3 texts), He Xiangu, a daughter of Xiwang mu, the Buddha of infinite kalpas, the ancient Buddha of Mount Qinglie and others. In some cases the transcriber's name is mentioned, such as Zhenyizi of Yongzhong (Sichuan), the venerable Yuexi of Canton, Cheng Yongqing of Shanxi and Fu Jinquan (5 texts). The texts outline the various major stages of the inner alchemical path and describe the energy pathways with great precision. They also make clear distinctions between men's and women's practices and, among the latter, differentiate according to their sexual status: virginal, mature or beyond menopause.

Nüzi daojiao congshu 女子道教叢書 (Collection of Daoist Writings for Women), by Yi Xinying, also found in a manuscript edition on Mount Qingcheng (Qing 1994, 406). This contains eleven texts, two works from the *Daozang xubian*, one work on women's liturgy, one text on women's Daoist lineages, and several descriptions of the principles of body transmutation, interception of menses and interior cultivation.

Nü jindan fayao 女金丹法要 (Essential Methods of Women's Golden Elixir), by Fu Jinquan. This consists of poems and prose texts attributed mainly to Sun Bu'er and revealed during her descents into the planchette. The author emphasizes both the importance of cultivating in companionship with somebody else and the necessity of performing virtuous acts. Women must purify their karma, repent their sins and cultivate goodness, sincerity, filial piety and proper wively devotion. Some of the texts found here are also contained in the *Nüdan hebian*.

WORLDVIEW

WOMEN AND SEXUALITY. Sexuality, the joining of all natural forces in the rhythm of yin and yang, is at the center of the Daoist universe. It appears either as codified marital relations and formal sexual rites or, in the case of celibate practitioners, as an imaginary union with a divine partner. Nothing could be more inauspicious than the rupture between two things, and only the proper union of yin and yang, the feminine and the masculine, can provide access to the one energy of the Dao—a union that may be bodily, spiritual or imaginary (see Robinet 1988).

Each participant has his or her particular role. The man creates and brings forth (*sheng* 生), the woman changes and transforms (*hua* 化). Within this framework, each takes on a number of different aspects, in accordance with the changing vision of femininity in the different traditions and historical ages. In some eras, women appear predominantly as servants and companions, in others they represent an ideal beauty, without which access to the interior and imaginary world of the divine is not possible.

The tradition of Highest Clarity has a rather ambiguous position toward sexuality. It does not reject it altogether but relegates it among the lesser techniques which will not grant higher forms of realization, because only sexual abstinence and chastity allows the vision of and communication with the transcendents—an understanding Highest Clarity shares with other religions of the world. Although the basic theme of sexual union is preserved, it is also transposed into the spiritual realm, into a form of interaction with the divine and invisible (see Schafer 1978b; Cahill 1985; 1992b). As the *Zhen'gao* says: "When a perfected appears as a presence of light and one engages with him or her, then this is union with the light, love between two beings of light. Although they are then called husband and wife, they do not engage in marital relations" (2.2a; see Despeux 1990, 35).

The importance of sexuality in Daoism has nothing to do with the social status of women. In fact, the practices are directly related to the frequent visits Daoists paid to prostitutes. A famous patron of the "flower ladies," as they were called, was the celebrated alchemist and poet Lü Dongbin, a semi-legendary figure who is described as having engaged happily in worldly pleasures and frequently visited the ladies not because he was a dissolute man, but to convert them (see Baldrian-Hussein 1986).

CELIBATE AND MONASTIC LIFE. Women Daoists who embraced the monastic lifestyle lived in institutions known as *guan* 觀, which arose in the fifth to sixth centuries and may or may not have been reserved for women. We know that the earliest advocate of a celibate life was Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之(365-448) who, probably inspired by the Buddhist model, tried to reform the Celestial Masters along these lines. Similarly, the school of Highest Clarity from an early age emphasized the need to remain chaste

in order to be able to visualize the deities (see Schipper 1984; Eskildsen 1998). Tao Hongjing, for example, was celibate; but even under his direction, institutions on Maoshan were not strictly monastic, instead housing adepts of both sexes and even their entire families (Strickmann 1978, 471). Daoism has a long history of debate and polemics regarding celibacy. Some were much in favor of it, as for example Song Wenming 宋文明 of the early sixth century who strongly recommended it for all Daoists (Maspero 1981, 411). Others preferred family life, as for example Li Bo 李播 of the Songyang guan 嵩陽館 (Abbey of the Sunny Slope) who presented a memorial to the emperor in the early seventh century recommending that he not prohibit marriages among Daoist clergy (Maspero 1981, 425). It seems nevertheless that the majority of temples under the Tang observed segregation of the sexes—evident from the different statistics given for women's versus men's institutions.

There is no dearth of examples of monasteries where promiscuity was the order of the day. The most prestigious among them is the Xianyi guan 咸宜觀 (Abbey of Universal Benefit), located in the southwest corner of Chang'an. It was named after Princess Xianyi, the twenty-second daughter of Emperor Xuanzong, who became a Daoist nun and resident of the temple in 862 (see des Rotours 1981). Many women from aristocratic and official families of Chang'an, once widowed, became Daoist nuns and residents of this temple, continuing to lead a highly luxurious life, aided by any number of servants. They rubbed shoulders with women from many social classes, including the celebrated courtisane and poetess Yu Xuanji 魚玄機, who was born into a poor family around 844 and was married to a junior official as his second wife. Repudiated by her husband's first wife, she joined the Xianji guan, where she soon took the young poet Wen Tingyun 溫庭均 as her lover and grew into a famous writer, renowned as one of the leading poetesses of the Tang (see Cahill, forthcoming). Similar to that of Yu Xuanji, typically these "conversions" to Daoism had nothing to do with a subtle, religious vocation, but rather allowed women to escape their husbands fury and enter the literary world. Frequently, too, the ladies, like Yu Xuanji, led a rather licentious life, but few ended as tragically—accused of having beaten a young slave girl to death, she was executed. Still, there are also contrary examples. Li Xuanzhen 李玄真, another resident of the temple, was so devoted to her parents that she received a biography as virtuous female in the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old History of the Tang; 193.5151).

The regimentation and segregation of Daoist institutions seems to have become a great deal stricter under the Song. In 927, the first Song emperor issued the following edict: "There are decadent tendencies in the temples, including wearing rough fabric and cohabitation with women and children. This is prohibited for all Daoists. Those with family must live outside of the

temple compound. From now on it shall be illegal to install someone as a Daoist without proper official authority." At this time, close relatives, such as father or brother, were still allowed to live in the temples, but a follow-up edict of 1009 or 1012 prohibited even that. The rule against the marriage of Buddhist clergy was reiterated strongly in the later twelfth century and again under the Yuan (see Eichhorn 1955). The issue does not seem to have disappeared quite yet.

With the growth of Complete Perfection, a new area of flourishing unfolded for women Daoists. The school supported the foundation of a number of *guan* especially for women, created all over north China wherever Quanzhen influence pertained. The initiative for their construction typically issued from women who had lost family support, be they widowed or orphaned, and whose activities tended to be strongest in the larger cities (see Despeux 1990, 131-38). Monastic life in Complete Perfection Daoism, both for men and women, was strictly regulated; its daily schedule contained set periods for recitation of liturgical texts, work for the community and individual practice, including inner alchemical exercises. Nine precepts were specifically geared towards women (see *Chuzhen jielü* 25; Despeux 1990, 147-52). The precepts still apply today and tend to reveal qualities associated with women in Chinese society—placing them firmly in the house where their tasks are predominantly related to cooking and homemaking. In addition, the rules also emphasize the distinction between women Daoists and practitioners of local, popular and shamanic cults—the latter are not permitted to participate in vegetarian assemblies.

IMAGES OF WOMEN. In Daoist texts, both of religious and philosophical provenance, the conception of women and the female is ambivalent. It has been said that Daoism favors the feminine because it emphasizes the importance of yin, of softness, of nonaction. Certain scholars have affirmed this predominance of the feminine (Needham 1956; Chen 1974), others have considered the so-called feminine techniques of the *Daode jing* as a mere means toward political domination (Creel 1970). Roger Ames sees the feminine in Daoism as the true complement of the masculine and finds that the realization of the sage in the world, rather than being a reduction to feminine values, lies in fact in the reconciliation of opposites manifest in the incarnation of the Dao in a quasi androgynous ideal (Ames 1981, 36).

In the religion, women are predominantly understood with the help of a cosmological model that emphasizes the alternation and complementarity of yin and yang. In all cases, they are classified as yin and participate in the various ambiguities associated with this cosmic principle, which is most certainly complementary to yang, but also contains elements of being impure, dark, menacing and dangerous (see Black 1986).

Women are impure beings, and their menstrual flow is interpreted as unclean and polluting to the point where interception of the menses constitutes a form of purification. Inner alchemical texts consistently associate menstruation with impurity and never tire of emphasizing the "purity and tranquility" women should develop. Closely related to this are numerous taboos common in Chinese society, if not the world at large, regarding menstruation: during their period, women are not only impure but also dangerous and must not be approached (see Ahern 1975, 193-214).

Despite all this, the negative connotations of being female in many descriptions of Daoist practice and cosmology are counterbalanced by the strong affirmation that women can realize the Dao more readily than men because they have the inborn power of becoming mothers. The notion of the immortal embryo and its gestation through ten symbolic months is constantly reiterated in inner alchemical literature, and texts on women's practices make it clear that their maternal function constitutes a great advantage over men. While men have to develop a womb inside themselves and learn how to nurture an embryo in it, guarding and cherishing it like a valuable pearl, women already have this faculty naturally and thus have a much easier time learning the practice. "In the case of women, we discuss breathing techniques but not embryonic practices" (preface by He Longxiang). As the internal movement of energies corresponds to the gestative activities already engendered in women, their spiritual progress in inner alchemy is accordingly faster than that of the men.

There are thus a number of different and even contradictory images associated with women in Daoism. It is impossible to generate a comprehensive view from the few documents we have, which moreover reflect different positions and schools. It is also difficult to distinguish the different aspects of Daoism reflected in these views. It is evident that women had to struggle to liberate themselves from the constraints put upon them in Chinese society. One of the victories they won—and not a minor one—was certainly their right to remain celibate and not have to give birth to male children. In addition, one can say that women were essentially venerated for the symbolic value attached to their created image and for the particular benefits they provided due to their exceptional gifts of communicating with the divine and attaining the Dao.

Practices

MEDIUMISTIC ACTIVITIES. The distinction between popular and literary Daoism, on the one hand, and the official religion and mediumistic cults, on the other, has not always been well marked. The border is even more vague in the case of Daoist women, whether they appear in cults, in

the pantheon or as adepts, because they played such dominant roles in local movements.

China has a long shamanic tradition, especially developed in the southern state of Chu, in which women played an important role. Called *wu* 巫, *zhu* 祝 or *ling* 靈, they served the invisible world through chanting and dancing, inviting the spirits to descend (*jiang* 降) into their bodies and engaging in amorous relationships with them (see Hawkes 1959; 1967; Mathieu 1987). A number of historical sources of the Han testify to the presence of shamans all over China in the early centuries C.E. (see Thiel 1968). Some were invited by the emperor to set up temples in the capital, mainly to support the state and help cure diseases (Overmyer 1991, 97). During the same period, early Daoist movements first developed with their own institutions, well demarcated against popular shamanism and yet assimilating certain of its elements. It is likely that revealed texts and spirit-writings were inspired by the practices of popular shamans.

Daoist literature consists, to a considerable degree, of texts revealed to mediums and shamans in a state of possession. The first examples go all the way back to the most ancient versions of the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace), which clearly describes itself as a "celestial book" (*tianshu* 天書; see Overmyer and Jordan 1986, 37). Similarly the *Zhen'gao* has strong shamanistic overtones (see Hyland 1984). It states: "If perfected and divine spirits descend into an impure person of the world, they are no longer acting or writing with their own feet and hands. As above and below are so far distant from each other, how can their traces [writings] be truly visible [to humans]?" (1.7b).

Revealed scriptures, the "traces" of the divine, usually came out of spirit-writing séances, which have been metaphorically called "turnings of the phoenix" (*fuluan* 扶鸞). The term suggests goddesses as major manifesting spirits, because they use the phoenix as their mount, just as their male counterparts ride on dragons or cranes (see Xu 1985). Mediumistic literature enthralled the Chinese literary elite, well before the French surrealists. Its particular style was especially valued under the Song, with literati such as Shen Gua 沈括 and Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 showing a vivid interest in it. They have left behind detailed descriptions of spirit-writing practices, especially associated with the cult of the Purple Lady (Zigu 紫姑), the goddess of latrines. Originally a human female, she lived in the late eighth century and died a horrible death at the hands of the jealous first wife of her husband, who mutilated her and let her perish in low flames in the latrines. Her feast day is the fifteenth of the first lunar month; at this time many women enter a trance state and become possessed by her to be questioned about all sorts of subjects (Maspero 1981, 135-37). Venerated as the protectress of women, ever since the Song she has appeared frequently in women's spirit-writing séances, a practice that picked up even more in the Ming and Qing,

both among literati and in popular cults. Then almost every district had a special altar in her honor, and Emperor Shizong (r. 1522-1566) himself had one set up at court. The Qing codes prohibited spirit-writing, but the practice continued anyway. A close relationship developed between mediumistic séances, the Eight Immortals surrounding Lü Dongbin and women's Daoism.

Women played a privileged role in mediumist circles. Both the traditions at the root of women's inner alchemical texts and the various female lineages are strongly characterized by shamanic elements and those of women's mediumistic cults. Women mediums probably served to redirect the men and women of those cults; as their techniques were assimilated into Daoism, so their roles and functions underwent a new interpretation.

SEXUAL PRACTICES. In the early movement of the Celestial Masters, all community members were initiated into and subsequently subjected to a religious life of strict moral control and ritual activity. Women in the movement both played key organizational roles and were essential in the "rites of passage" (*guodu* 過度) or initiation (see Schipper 1984). Sexual in nature, the latter went back to the "arts of the bedchamber" (*fangzhong shu* 房中術), part of ancient longevity techniques (see Wile 1992), and to the ecstatic unions of shamans with the divine. Best known is the sexual rite of "harmonizing the energies" (*heqi* 合氣), during which community members, independent of their marital affiliations, were joined in formal sexual intercourse (see Stein 1963). The rites took place in the oratory or "chamber of tranquility" (*jingshi* 靜室) in the presence of a master and an instructor. They involved ritualized body movements in alignment with specific directions, in accordance with certain numbers and in correspondence with the network of the stars in the sky. In addition, the ritual included visualization of energies inside the body as well as concentration on and retention of seminal essence and vital spirits. The arts of the oratory were not as explicitly sexual as those of the bedchamber or the ritual union at the end of the rite that led to the formation of the immortal embryo, as is specified in the *Huangshu guodu yi* 黃書過度儀 (Observances for the Rites of Passage According to the Yellow Book, CT 1294; see Kalinowski 1985). The ritual union of the adepts was thought not only to benefit themselves, but also to influence the order of the universe by supporting the cosmic energies in their union and renewal.

While the Celestial Masters engaged in sexual rites, authors from other ends of the Daoist spectrum placed sexual techniques among the minor arts. One example is Ge Hong 葛洪 (273-341), who affirms the importance of the exchange of yin and yang and even agrees that the erotic arts are auspicious and help people to eliminate diseases and prolong life. Nevertheless, they are only a beginning, and the practice of reverting the essence, the "yin-elixir" (*yindan* 陰丹), to nourish the brain stands at the beginning of a

higher, internalized form of sexual alchemy. Little by little the adept visualizes both male and female deities in his own body and sees how they unite sexually. Through this, ordinary union is transcended and moves into the invisible realm, becoming a union of human and divine through the mediation of celestial partners and divine marriages: such were the practices advocated in Highest Clarity (see Cahill 1992b).

Sexual union ideally was an even exchange of energies, but it soon becomes apparent that its religious practice deviated into a sort of sexual vampirism, in which one partner tried to obtain energies at the cost of the other, a practice described in a Song text as the "plucking [of energy] in [amorous] combat" (*caizhan* 採戰). Although mostly to the advantage of the male, women too could benefit from this practice.

> The Queen Mother of the West is an example of a woman who obtained the Way [of attaining immortality] by nurturing her yin essence. Every time she had intercourse with a man, he would immediately fall ill, but her own face was smooth and transparent so that she had no need for rouge and face powder. She always fed on milk and played the five-stringed lute so that her heart was always harmonious and her thoughts composed and she had no other desires. Also, the Queen Mother of the West had no husband, but she liked to copulate with young boys. This secret, however, must not be divulged, lest other women should try to imitate the Queen's methods (van Gulik 1961, 158; see also Wile, 1992, 102-3; Ishihara and Levy 1970).

But these deviations, found in non-Daoist literature, have always been described as heterodox and improper practice, even though they did in fact exist and were practiced even within certain strands of the Daoist religion.

Within Daoist religious thinking, sexual union is understood as a union of bodies—the common way of thinking about coitus—and thus a union of energies (while retaining the semen). It is, beyond that, also a union of minds and thinking (*yi* 意), practiced through the active visualization of the outer or inner body, the kind of union advocated in Highest Clarity and a sort of mystical marriage (see Robinet 1988). In the schools of inner alchemy, moreover, one finds again two basic attitudes toward women and sexual union. First, when the sexual act is undertaken while the semen is retained, intercourse forms the basis of the psycho-physiological transformations centered on the inner body. Women here are equal partners to men and can benefit to a similar degree. Second, when chastity is advised, the mediumistic qualities of women come to the foreground and autoerotic practices take over, such as the massaging of the man's penis or the woman's breasts. Women here are models of saintliness. In either case, the goal of the union is the formation of an immortal embryo, the first sprout of the adept's spiritual rebirth.

WOMEN'S INNER ALCHEMY (*Nüdan* 女丹) or the female way (*Kundao* 坤道). Textual sources earlier than the Qing dynasty on women's inner alchemy mention only a few specific practices for women. An occasional description might state that the nature of women is yin while that of men is yang. Texts on breathing techniques, for example, might specify that left is yang while right is yin, so that the breath turns toward the left in men and toward the right in women. Similarly, in certain rites (as noted earlier), a man uses things with his left hand, while a woman uses her right.

Writings on women's inner alchemy describe basic techniques and divide the process into three stages: 1) refining the seminal essence and transforming it into energy; 2) refining the energy and transforming it into spirit; and 3) refining the spirit to return to emptiness. In the first stage, the adept joins the various opposite (yin and yang) forces in the interior of his or her body and through them forms an embryo of energy. During the second stage and in the course of ten symbolic months, this embryo of energy gives birth to a being of light known as the original spirit force (*yuanshen* 元神). This birth takes place through the top of the head, because the alchemical process inverts the course of ordinary procedures. This luminous spirit, then, as it leaves and then re-enters the body, is further sublimated in the third stage to eventually merge back completely into cosmic emptiness.

Difference between the sexes occurs only in the first of these three stages. Instead of refining seminal essence and transforming it into energy, women refine their menstrual blood by progressively diminishing their menstrual flow and eventually stopping it altogether. This is known as "decapitating the red dragon" (*duan chilong* 斷赤龍) and first mentioned in a text of the year 1310. The cessation of the flow identifies the adept as pregnant—pregnant with an embryo of pure energy—on the one hand, and as prepubescent, on the other. Menstrual blood is sublimated and brings forth a "new blood," which certain texts call the "white marrow of the phoenix" (*baifeng sui* 白鳳髓). Both, this term and the expression "red dragon," move the power of the menstrual blood and its refined form to a new and higher level of spiritual power. When the texts wish to indicate the physical substance commonly discharged during menstruation, they use ordinary or medical terms, such as *yuexue* 月血, "monthly blood," or *yueshui* 月水, "monthly flow." As the system does not allow a rupture between matter and spirit, the new symbolic language implies that both a physiological and spiritual transformation takes place so that, in effect, the decapitation of the red dragon is physically present as the complete cessation of the menstrual flow.

In Chinese medicine, menstrual blood represents the fundamental energy of women, just as seminal fluid is the key energetic power of men. Rising steadily until puberty, it begins to decline once outflow starts, moving progressively towards weakening and old age. Energy thus decreases with

every month as the woman loses her menstrual blood, until she reaches menopause when the flow stops completely. Her loss of original energy through menstruation is the same loss that men undergo through the ejaculation of semen.

In addition, medical literature insists, menstrual blood is formed and nurtured by milky secretions of the breasts which, a few days before menstruation, sink down from the breasts to the abdomen and there transform into blood. The refinement of menstrual blood into energy is therefore a reversal of the natural process and consists of its returning to milky secretions. It begins with breast massages which stimulate the internal fire of sexual desire, which is then controlled to nurture the inner being. In addition, various psycho-physiological methods are used to heat the descended energy in the abdomen and transform the growing menstrual blood back into breast secretions. A warm energy is felt to rotate around the navel, the area gets very hot, and the "red is transformed into the white" (*Xiuwang mu nüxiu zhengtu*, no. 6, p. 4). Once the "white marrow of the phoenix" is present in sufficient quantity—an indication that the "red dragon" has been transformed to a great degree—the adept can begin the refinement and inversion of the energy, thus proceeding to stages two and three of the process.

Structurally, the cessation of the menstrual flow in women is the same as the retention of the semen in men. In both cases, loss of an essential substance is stopped and with it, as stated frequently in the texts, the loss of original energy. At the same time, this cessation constitutes a reversal of the natural processes and allows, through interiorization, the symbolic creation of a new sprout of energy within, which then turns into an embryo of energy. The best time to undertake the exercise is two days before menstruation, when yang energy is just about to transform into yin blood. This moment is the time when the natural tendencies can be redirected, and adepts should activate the wind [of respiration] to fan the fire and pick the divine medicine: "When yang is close to being transformed into yin and to flow out through the jade channel [vagina], quickly get on the wheel of fire. When the wind of the Xun blows in the upper part, in the original Scarlet Palace [solar plexus], decapitate the periodic flow of blood so that it can never run again!" (*Nü jindan* 2.23a).

Once this is attained, the second and third stages of the process take over. These place women into an intense state of contemplation and nonaction in which they must guard against the stagnation of their energies, which tend to clot due to the basic nature of women as yin. At this time women should also double their efforts of doing good works, so that their spirit can increasingly join cosmic emptiness.

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