

The Path to Mount Kunlun: Dual Cultivation of Spirit and Communal Body in the *Jindan zhenchuan* 金丹真傳 (Perfect Transmission of the Golden Elixir): Part I¹

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Abstract

This two-part study examines the *Jindan zhenchuan* 金丹真傳 (*Perfect Transmission of the Golden Elixir*), a Ming-dynasty alchemical text often associated with sexual internal alchemy. The first part explores the text's composition, commentary tradition, and doctrinal foundations centered on the interplay of yin and yang. It outlines the history and basic principles of sexual cultivation, but questions long-standing sexual interpretations of alchemical symbolism – highlighting both the rarity of explicit sexual methods in the literature and the tendency to interpret metaphors too literally. In this light, the *Jindan zhenchuan* stands out as a text that may suggest sexual practices, yet ultimately points in a different direction.

The study also reassesses the identity of the text's authors, portraying them not as heirs to a secret lineage but as educated elites unaffiliated with any established alchemical tradition. Their aim was less to transmit hidden teachings than to restore access to the sacred world of Daoist immortals. The *Jindan zhenchuan* is thus best understood as a religious text, guiding ordinary practitioners toward transcendence and union with the gods on Mount Kunlun. Its final three stages, unfolding entirely in the divine realm, mark its distinctive vision of alchemical transformation through divine assistance.

The second part explores the *Jindan zhenchuan*'s cultivation method, modeled on the structure of the immortal world as a guide for human transformation. Though involving others, the practice is non-sexual and based on a unique vision of the body. Through ritual and visualization, the practitioner creates a "communal body" with assistants, using the technique of "sex at a distance" and the instrument *tuoyue* to enable contact without physical touch. Entering deep concentration, the practitioner withdraws from the external world, allowing the spirit to generate the elixir of immortality within this collective space. Ultimately, the *Jindan zhenchuan* reveals a complex vision of internal alchemy – one that integrates ritual, community, divine aid, and a reimagined understanding of the body.

Keywords

Daoism, *Jindan zhenchuan*, internal alchemy, sexual alchemy, communal body, ritual cultivation, immortality and transcendence

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Part One: Sexual Alchemy and *Jindan zhenchuan*

The scriptures on internal alchemy present a formidable challenge to readers due to their intricate layers of metaphors and symbolic language. Within these texts, one encounters vivid descriptions of the interplay between the mythical figures of dragon and tiger, the fusion of lead with mercury, the alchemical process enacted within a furnace and cauldron, and the profound concept of birthing a sacred embryo through allegorical acts of copulation and pregnancy.

Unsurprisingly, both practitioners and scholars have endeavored to decode the cryptic messages within these scriptures, striving to strip away the metaphorical language and uncover the practical application underlying the layers of alchemical metaphors. These efforts became particularly prevalent in the latter half of the 19th century, as alchemists began adapting internal alchemy to modern scientific paradigms. They sought to portray it not as a superstitious religious practice but rather as a method of human transformation grounded in natural laws and physiological processes (Goossaert 1997, 297–306; Liu 2009a, 77–121; Lee 2010).

One approach to interpreting alchemical language involved a literal understanding of its sexual metaphors. Alchemical practice is intricately woven with the manipulation of yin and yang interactions, and its language, rooted in the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), is rich with sexual allegories (Lai 2010; Mozias 2020, 79–90; Pregadio 2011). Consequently, sexual metaphors are prevalent in alchemical texts. This literal interpretation led to the concept of a sub-tradition of internal alchemy focused on sexual practices – sexual alchemy – often referred to as dual cultivation (*shuangxiu* 雙修) or yin-yang cultivation (*yinyang shuangxiu* 陰陽雙修) (Hao 1994, 244–303; Hudson 2008, 400–430; Liu 2009b, 121–140; Mozias 2020, 7–11, 155–173; Wile 1992, 146–192).

According to this interpretation, some alchemists were able to create the elixir of immortality through sexual intercourse. During the act, they would avoid ejaculation and instead absorb vital fluids or formless energy from their assistants' bodies, thereby forming the elixir of immortality within themselves and becoming “pregnant” with the “sacred embryo” (*shengtai* 聖胎).² This belief holds that while ordinary sexual intercourse leads to the birth of a child, sexual alchemy results in the creation of an elixir.

The issue with viewing sexual alchemy as a significant sub-tradition of internal alchemy is that the vast body of alchemical texts offers little evidence of specific sexual practices.³ Most texts labeled as “sexual” contain only metaphors and do not detail any methods of sexual cultivation. Additionally, those texts that do describe sexual practices using alchemical terminology are marginal, disconnected from established alchemical schools and lineages, and lack a recognized commentary tradition.

The study of sexual alchemy is complex and requires further research, much of which lies beyond the scope of this paper. This paper focuses on a single text, the *Jindan zhenchuan* 金丹真傳 (Perfect Transmission of the Golden Elixir, ZWDS 11, 860–876). This text is arguably the most important work

² On the Daoist embryology, see Despeux 2016, 147–185; Mozias 2020, 115–131; Steavu 2016, 111–146.

³ The concept of sexual alchemy, though widely accepted in modern scholarship, is based on scant evidence and speculative interpretations of traditional texts. Matthias Daly recently critiqued these sexual readings, emphasizing their lack of historical and textual support and calling for a more cautious approach to alchemical symbolism. See Daly 2023.

that is commonly, though not universally, believed to belong to the tradition of sexual alchemy.⁴ It is likely the only text within this tradition that provides a discernible description of dual practice and is associated with a lineage, a relatively rich commentary tradition, and a system of self-cultivation.

Penned towards the conclusion of the Ming dynasty, this text gained significant popularity by the late 19th century. During this period, some practitioners asserted that it encapsulated the essence of the Southern School (*nanzong* 南宗) of internal alchemy and utilized its methods to interpret classical alchemical scriptures.⁵

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part examines the composition of the *Jindan zhenchuan* and its associated commentary tradition. It explores the fundamental principles of alchemical doctrine, which center on the manipulation of yin and yang, and critically evaluates the sexual interpretation of this concept.

Finally, it examines some crucial elements of the *Jindan zhenchuan* tradition. It argues that its practitioners were not part of a secret esoteric transmission line but rather members of the educated elite – unaffiliated with any alchemical lineage – seeking to rediscover the path to immortality and the sacred world. It also demonstrates that the *Jindan zhenchuan* is a religious text aimed at guiding ordinary humans back to the sacred realm of Daoist immortals and gods.

The second part of the paper explores the doctrine and self-cultivation method described in the *Jindan zhenchuan*. It shows that practices in the immortal realm served as a blueprint for cultivation in the human world. It also demonstrates that while its method does involve interactions with other humans, it is not a form of sexual cultivation. Instead, it represents a communal practice based on a unique understanding of the body in alchemical terms. This approach involves transcending the physical body's boundaries to create a “communal body,” collectively formed by companions and assistants. The practitioner's internal spirit interacts with this communal body to produce the elixir of immortality.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* is a unique text within the alchemical tradition, but not because it advocates sexual cultivation. Rather, it demonstrates that internal alchemy may extend beyond mere meditative or individual psychophysical practices, as commonly portrayed. While contemporary descriptions of internal alchemy are often narrow and one-sided, this does not mean that practices involving others necessarily relate to sexuality. Instead, it is essential to consider elements such as ritual, communal practice, and human interaction with the sacred realm when analyzing these practices.

Jindan zhenchuan

The *Jindan zhenchuan* was compiled by the Ming alchemist Sun Ruzhong 孫汝忠 (b. 1575, fl. 1616), who recorded the teachings of his father, Sun Jiaoluan 孫教鸞 (1505–1610). It begins with an introduction in which Sun Ruzhong describes how his father met his master, received the knowledge of alchemical practice, and, after an unsuccessful attempt to carry it out, transmitted it to Sun Ruzhong. He then

⁴ The studies of the *Jindan zhenchuan* are limited. Some discussions of the text can be found in Akioka 1996; Daly 2023, 76–98; Hudson 2008, 424–427; Putuan zi 2014, 72–92; Tong Chenzi 2007, Zhang 2012, 17–35). The text is partly translated by Douglas Wile, see Wile 1992, 153–169.

⁵ The Southern school is traditionally considered to trace back to the renowned alchemist Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987?–1082), though its true founder was Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194–1229?). For further details, see Gai 2013, 53–94, 625–690.

presents the core of his father's teaching – a nine-step path of alchemical practice. This section consists of short verses, supposedly transmitted by Sun Jiaoluan, each outlining a step of the practice. These are followed by two commentaries attributed to Zhang Chonglie 張崇烈 (n.d.), and Li Kan 李堪 (n.d.). The text concludes with several short essays on the theory and practice of internal alchemy. All of this – including the commentaries – is part of Sun Ruzhong's original compilation and constitutes a single coherent text.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* was first published in 1615 during the Wanli era of the Ming dynasty (1358–1644) and underwent several editions during the Qing dynasty. The distinguished Qing alchemist Fu Jinquan 傅金銓 (1765–1844) edited the text and included it, along with his brief commentaries, in his collection of alchemical scriptures.⁶ I rely on this edition in my analysis of the text.⁷

At the beginning of the Qing period, certain scholar-officials developed an interest in the treatise. For example, Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲 (1638–1717) and Tao Susi 陶素耜 (fl. 1700–1711) were purportedly members of Sun's lineage. Both Qiu and Tao held high-ranking positions as officials and scholars. Qiu was also a disciple of the renowned Confucian thinker Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695) (Hudson 2008, 583–584, 629–633; Wang 2013; Wu 2005, 65–68). Qiu, in particular, frequently referenced the *Jindan zhenchuan* and documented some instructions related to its practice.

In the early 19th century, Sun's lineage resurfaced with the emergence of the Western School of internal alchemy. Li Xiyue 李西月 (1806–1856), the founder of this school, asserted that he was a disciple of one of its members. However, Li's teachings diverged significantly from those of Sun, as he even purported to have received direct transmission from the legendary immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 (Huo 2008, 43–44).

The *Jindan zhenchuan* remained relatively obscure and secondary until Fu Jinquan included it in his collection of internal alchemy treatises. Fu's family owned one of Sichuan's largest publishing houses, which continued to operate until the middle of the 20th century (Valussi 2012). One can speculate whether publishing several sexual treatises, including the *Jindan zhenchuan*, held some marketing significance. Regardless, this publication significantly enhanced the treatise's popularity, and by the second half of the 19th century, it had become well-known and widely practiced.

The popularity of the scripture is evident from the writings of the esteemed late Qing reformer and alchemist Zheng Guanying 鄭觀應 (1842–1922).⁸ Zheng frequently references the scripture and individuals who practiced its teachings in his works and letters. One of his mentors, Wan Litang 萬立唐 (1848–1915), also known as Fangnei sanren 方內散人, provided commentary on it and personally practiced its methods (Shi and Chen 2017). Zheng even assisted him and documented his disappointment when the cultivation did not yield the desired results (Lai 2018, 178–180).

⁶ For an in-depth exploration of Fu Jinquan, his life, and his teachings, see Xie 2005.

⁷ This analysis is based on the edition of the text published in ZWDS 11:860–876.

⁸ Zheng Guanying 鄭觀應 (1842–1922) was a prominent reformer and thinker during the late Qing dynasty, known for his political and economic ideas aimed at strengthening China against Western competition. His most famous work, *Shengshi weiyen* 盛世危言 (Words of Warning to a Prosperous Age), published in 1893, advocated for significant economic and political reforms. For more on his thinking and impact, see Guo, 2010. In addition to his reformist activities, Zheng was a key figure in the internal alchemy movement of his time. He studied with various alchemical masters, participated in spirit-writing séances, published numerous alchemical scriptures and authored essays on the theory and practice of internal alchemy. For more on his alchemical and religious pursuits, see, see Lai 2018, 151–202.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked the pinnacle of the scripture's popularity. During this period, some alchemists began to associate the *Jindan zhenchuan* with the Southern School method of practice. The term "Southern School" typically refers to the alchemical lineage tracing back to Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987?–1082), with Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194–1229?) considered its true founder during the Southern Song dynasty (Gai 2013). This lineage is often contrasted with the Northern School (also known as the Complete Perfection School), established by Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1113–1170) (Eskildsen 2004; Komjathy 2007; Yao 2000).

There is no historical basis for associating Zhang Boduan and Bai Yuchan with the teachings of the *Jindan zhenchuan*. However, linking the text with the Southern School underscores its influence during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some alchemists appeared to view it as a path to immortality comparable to the influential Complete Perfection school.

The popularity of the text began to wane as additional alchemical scriptures were printed, becoming more accessible, and a deeper understanding of internal alchemy developed. Thus, Chen Yingning, a renowned 20th-century reformer of internal alchemy, criticized those who relied on the *Jindan zhenchuan* to interpret Zhang Boduan's classic *Wuzhen pian* (Zhiji zi 2011, 12).

During the latter half of the 20th century, alchemist and scholar Zhang Yishang, along with his disciple Hu Fuchen, a distinguished scholar of internal alchemy, revitalized the interest in this treatise and promoted its method of practice (Zhang 2012, 17–35).

The *Jindan zhenchuan* is a relatively minor and marginal text that, nevertheless, gained popularity in the second half of the 19th century. Its uniqueness lies in being one of the few texts to explicitly state that alchemical self-cultivation requires the involvement of other people – a claim that has often been interpreted as a reference to sexual cultivation.

Yin and Yang

The doctrine of alchemical self-cultivation revolves around the principle of yin-yang interaction. The *Jindan zhenchuan* elucidates this principle as follows:

If something lacks yin and yang, how could it conceive of itself? If a rooster were to hatch the eggs itself, the chicks would not be formed. "Me" is originally outwardly yang but inwardly yin; it is trigram Li ☲ and mercury. Without obtaining the genuine lead from the "other" and returning it to the mercury, going against the flow, how is it possible to form the sacred embryo and give birth to Buddhas and immortals?

"Other" is originally outwardly yin but inwardly yang; it is trigram Kan ☵ and lead. Without obtaining the genuine mercury from "me" and casting it into the lead, following along the flow, how is it possible to form an ordinary embryo and give birth to males and females? Therefore, following the flow births a human while going against the flow creates the elixir. There is profound meaning here.⁹

⁹ 物無陰陽，安得自孕？牡雞自卵，其雛不成。我本外陽而內陰，為離為汞。非得彼之真鉛，逆來歸汞，何以結聖胎而生佛、生仙？彼本外陰而內陽，為坎為鉛，非得我之真汞，順去投鉛，何以結凡胎而生男生女？故順則人，逆則丹，有旨哉 (ZWDS 11: 860.1b–2a).

It might be tempting to interpret such passages through the lens of sexual practice. However, such interpretations are often misguided, as these and similar passages describe the fundamental principles of alchemical practice. This principle is applied uniformly across all forms of internal alchemy, which aim to achieve immortality by harnessing the interaction of yin and yang. This process involves moving in a direction opposite to the natural flow of cosmic creation or human birth. Alchemists refer to this approach as “going against the flow” (*ni* 逆) ((Robinet 2011, 1–15; Ge 2001, 42–78).

The language of alchemical scriptures, while intricate and laden with metaphors and allegories, also demonstrates a structured and even schematic character. It revolves around a set of formulas derived from interpretations of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), as elaborated in the alchemical classic *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three in Accordance with the Book of Changes) (Lai 2010; Pregadio 2011).

According to this model, the transformations of the trigrams Qian ☰, Kun ☷, Kan ☵, and Li ☲ illustrate both the creation of the universe and the practice of self-cultivation. The pure yang and pure yin trigrams, Qian and Kun, symbolize the primordial Former-Heaven universe. Through their “copulation,” they exchange their middle lines, giving rise to the trigrams Kan and Li, which represent the creation of the Later-Heaven universe in which we reside.¹⁰

The functioning of the ordinary world is governed by the interaction between the Kan and Li trigrams. This concept also implies that neither pure yin nor pure yang exists in the ordinary world, as every instance of yin contains an element of yang, and every instance of yang holds an element of yin within.

Alchemical cultivation progresses in the opposite direction of the universe’s creation. Practitioners facilitate the union of the trigrams Kan and Li, prompting an exchange of their middle lines and thereby restoring them to their original state of perfection and transcendence. Scriptures typically describe this process as “taking the middle line from the trigram Kan and replenishing the trigram Li” (*qukan tianli* 取坎添離), thus returning Li to its original yang nature – the pure yang trigram Qian (Mozias 2020, 79–90; Wang 2011, 54–55).

Alchemical symbols and terms – such as dragon and tiger, mercury and lead, self and other – convey the same concept. These symbols can be interpreted in various ways and applied to specific alchemical practices.

Symbols like the trigram Li, me, the dragon, or mercury refer to the practitioner’s spirit, mind or heart. They represent the yang aspect of human nature, which embodies the potential for transcendence and immortality. However, this yang is imperfect, as it contains an element of yin within. The trigram Li, with its two yang lines on the outside and one yin line inside, vividly illustrates this principle.

To achieve purification, this imperfect yang must be “cured” with the “medicine of immortality.” This process involves replenishing the yang to restore it to its original, pure state, free from the influence of yin.

Conversely, the trigram Kan, along with symbols and terms such as “other,” “tiger,” or “lead,” represents the physical, material aspect of human existence. It signifies the body or, in some cases, the

¹⁰ In the *Yijing* system, a solid line symbolizes yang, while a broken line represents yin.

kidneys, which are linked to the sexual aspect of human life. This corresponds to the yin dimension of humanity, which embodies mortality and the ordinary material world.

However, yin is not entirely devoid of yang. The trigram Kan, with its two external yin lines and one internal yang line, vividly illustrates this idea. Practitioners can – and must – extract this yang and unify it with the spirit. This process “cures” the imperfect yang within the human being and facilitates the birth of the perfect immortal body, known as the yang-spirit.

The alchemical method requires the interaction between the yang and yin aspects of human existence, which typically correspond to the spiritual and physical dimensions of a person. This principle of simultaneous cultivation of both mind and body is referred to in alchemical language as the “dual cultivation of inner nature and life” (*xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修) (Ge 2001, 79–151; Mozias 2020, 103–106).

Since the entire practice relies on the interaction between yin and yang and draws its symbolic language from the *Yijing*, alchemical texts often employ sexual metaphors and terminology to illustrate these concepts. However, in most cases, the practice has little to do with actual sexual relations between male and female. Instead, it refers to the interaction between the practitioner’s spirit and body. The practitioner uses their spirit to locate the genuine yang – the “medicine of immortality” – within the physical body. They then employ the physical body to nurture this yang, allowing it to grow into a “sacred embryo” that eventually transforms into a perfected yang body. This perfected body unites the spiritual and physical aspects of the human being, enabling the practitioner to transcend physical form and achieve immortality (Mozias 2020, 174–206; Wang 2011).

Many scholars, however, believe that some alchemists interpreted sexual metaphors and terminology literally, leading to the development of a sexual interpretation of alchemical doctrine known as “sexual alchemy.”

Sexual Alchemy

In the *Jindan jiuzheng pian* 金丹就正篇 (Chapters on Seeking the Correct Understanding of the Golden Elixir, ZWDS 5:368–71), the famous Ming alchemist Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520–1601 or 1606) wrote the following:¹¹

I heard the Master say that to fulfill the way of the golden elixir, one should unify yin and yang. Yin and yang are one male and one female, one Li and one Kan, one lead and one mercury. They are the ingredients of the great elixir.

The perfect *qi* of Kan is called lead; the perfect essence of Li is called mercury. The former-heaven essence is accumulated in “me;” the former-heaven *qi* is taken from the “other.” Why is this so?

The “other” is Kan, which has yin on the outside and yang on the inside; it is symbolized by the water and the moon; in human beings, it is female. “Me” is Li, with yang on the outside and yin on the inside; it is symbolized by fire and the sun; in human beings it is male.

Hence, the way of male and female, yin and yang produces a human going along with the

¹¹ On Lu Xixing, see Mozias 2020, which argues that Lu was not a sexual alchemist. For the opposing view, which portrays Lu as a proponent of sexual alchemy, see Wang et al. 2016.

flow; it forms the elixir going against the flow. The principle is the same.¹²

Scholars often interpret this passage as outlining the theory of sexual alchemy – after all, Lu explicitly mentions male and female – and consequently view Lu Xixing as a practitioner of sexual alchemy (Wang et al. 2016, 207).

According to this sexual interpretation of alchemical doctrine, alchemical terms such as the trigrams Li and Kan, lead and mercury, me and other – all represent male and female, respectively. In a natural context, when a man and woman unite, a child is conceived in the woman's womb. Alchemical cultivation proceeds in the opposite direction: during dual cultivation, the male absorbs the female's invisible vital energy and forms a sage embryo – his new self – in the lower elixir field below the abdomen (Hao 1994, 244–303; Mozias 2020, 158).

Scholars often present sexual alchemy as a refined form of the bedchamber arts (*fangzhong shu* 房中術), which emphasize ejaculation control and the absorption of female vital fluids to enhance health and longevity (Wile 1992). Sexual alchemists differ in two key ways: their goal is immortality rather than mere health, and they do not absorb physical fluids or steal life force from female partners. While their practice may involve sexual interaction, the focus is on absorbing the pure, immaterial qi of the Former Heaven, not the material essence of the Later Heaven (Hudson 2008, 400). This qi is gathered through a ritualized sexual act that follows the cosmological patterns of the ebb and flow of yin and yang as described in the *Yijing* (Mozias 2020, 159–163).

Scholars often trace the tradition of sexual alchemy to Liu Yongnian 劉永年 (fl. 1138–1168), an alleged disciple of Zhang Boduan, author of the alchemical classic *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Chapters on Awakening to Perfection, DZ 141–146) and the supposed founder of the Southern School of internal alchemy (*nanzong* 南宗). This dual-cultivation tradition is also believed to include other prominent figures such as Weng Baoguang 翁葆光 (fl. 1173), Chen Zhixu 陳至虛 (1289–after 1335), Lu Xixing, Li Xiyue, and others (Hudson 2008, 407–411; Mozias 2020, 7–10).

At first glance, the idea of sexual alchemy as a significant subset of internal alchemy appears compelling. It offers a straightforward interpretation of alchemical symbolism and is often linked to prominent historical figures. Its relationship with the bedchamber arts is complex, as the two often overlap – many bedchamber texts adopt alchemical terminology (Wile 1992, 133–146).

Some traditional sexual techniques also resemble internal alchemical practices. For example, the method of “reverting essence to nourish the brain” (*huanjing bunao* 還精補腦), which involves semen retention and the upward circulation of qi, closely parallels the Lesser Celestial Orbit (*xiao zhoutian* 小周天), where qi is circulated along the body's governing and conception vessels (Hudson 2008, 418–420). This similarity has led some scholars to suggest that internal alchemy may have originated in sexual practices (Hao 1994, 55).

However, when we examine the so-called tradition of sexual cultivation and the scriptures associated with it, numerous problems immediately arise. The terminology and symbolism – such as

¹² 予聞之師，金丹之道，必資陰陽相合而成。陰陽者，一男一女也，一離一坎也，一鉛一汞也，此大丹之藥物也。夫坎之真氣謂之鉛，離之真精謂之汞。先天之精積於我，先天之氣取於彼。何以故？彼，坎也，外陰而內陽，于象為水為月，其于人也為女；我，離也，外陽而內陰，于象為火為日，其于人也為男，故夫男女陰陽之道，順之而生人，逆之而成丹，其理一焉者也 (ZWDS 5:368.2a). The translation of the passage is taken from Mozias 2020, 164.

that found in the quotation from Lu Xixing above – do not necessarily describe sexual alchemy. Lu may simply be restating the traditional Daoist view that sexual relations, cosmological processes, and self-cultivation all follow the same underlying principles, using this framework to describe a conventional alchemical practice.

Metaphorical language that appears to contain sexual imagery is a common feature in alchemical texts, and alchemists often emphasized that such metaphors should not be taken literally. For example, the renowned alchemist Yu Yan 俞琰 (1258–1314) wrote the following about alchemical metaphors:

From the point of view of the way of heaven, they are called sun and moon, cold and heat. From the point of view of the way of earth, they are called mountain and swamp, lead and mercury. From the point of view of the way of human beings, they are called husband and wife, male and female.

How could these names refer to the real sun and moon, cold and heat, mountain and swamp, lead and mercury, husband and wife, male and female? They are nothing but metaphors.¹³

The problem with sexual interpretation of texts purportedly linked to the dual cultivation tradition relies solely on a literal reading of their metaphorical language. Thus, Douglas Wile cites Huang Chao-han, who, in his classical study of the legendary immortal Zhang Sanfeng 張三丰, interprets the vague and metaphorical alchemical poem *Wugen shu* 無根樹 (The Rootless Tree), attributed to Zhang, as describing “pair cultivation,” asserting that it is “very difficult to believe” otherwise.¹⁴ While Huang is an esteemed scholar, the argument that it is “very difficult to believe” is less convincing, especially considering that the two main commentaries on the *Wugen shu*, which Huang acknowledges in the same paragraph, interpret the text in a non-sexual manner.¹⁵

The problem, as Mattias Daly demonstrates in his thorough analysis of such interpretations, is that they are often biased and distort the intended meaning of the original texts (Daly 2023, 33–51). Beyond this literal reading of alchemical metaphors, these texts offer no concrete support for a sexual interpretation – they contain no explicit sexual methods. On the contrary, they consistently present their techniques from the perspective of standard solitary practice. A closer examination of Lu Xixing’s teachings, for example, suggests that he was not a sexual alchemist at all, but rather practiced a conventional form of internal alchemy (Mozias 2020, 163–173).

This does not imply that texts explicitly describing sexual methods are nonexistent. Although explicit descriptions are largely absent from the works of prominent alchemists whom modern scholars categorize as sexual alchemists, scholars frequently interpret these texts as sexual in nature through the lens of Ming and Qing sexual manuals. For instance, Hudson argues that the Yuan alchemist Chen Zhixu

¹³ 以天道言，則曰日月，日寒暑。以地道言，則曰山澤，日鉛汞。以人道言，則曰夫婦，曰男女。豈真有所謂日月，寒暑，山澤，鉛汞，夫婦，男女哉？無非譬喻也 (DZ 1005, 5a). Translation by Mozias, in Mozias 2020, 165.

¹⁴ See Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber*, 147. See Wile’s translation of the *Wugen shu* in Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber*, 188–192.

¹⁵ These two commentaries were written by Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) and Li Xiyue. Somewhat paradoxically, Li Xiyue is regarded as a sexual alchemist by many modern scholars, yet his commentary on the *Wugen shu* is clearly non-sexual. Does this suggest that the teachings of both Li Xiyue and the *Wugen shu* have no connection to sexual cultivation? This question warrants further research.

practiced sexual alchemy, but his analysis relies on reading Chen's writings through later Ming-period sources (Hudson 2008, 413).

Examples of such texts include the *Jindan jieyao* 金丹節要 (*Summary of the Golden Elixir*) and the *Caizhen jiyao* 採真機要 (*Secret Principles of Gathering the True Essence*), both included in the sexual compendium *Sanfeng danjue* 三丰丹訣 (*Alchemical Instructions of [Zhang] Sanfeng*, ZWDS 11:322–352) (Mozias 2020, 322–352; Wile 1992, 169–188). Another example is *Daoyuan yiqi* 道元一氣 (*The Unitary Qi of the Way's Origin*), examined by Liu Xun (Liu 2009b).

According to the descriptions of the practice in these texts, it typically begins with practitioners calming their minds and preparing a suitable environment for cultivation. They then select female assistants, who are referred to as “furnaces” or “cauldrons,” depending on the specific context. These female assistants are often required to be virgins no older than 14, with their appearance frequently considered important.

During intercourse, the alchemists aim to gather the perfect energy of qi, which may manifest at particular moments in the partner's menstrual cycle or at specific points during the practice. Rather than focusing on the sexual act itself, the practitioners often concentrate on internal sensations throughout the process. Moreover, sexual alchemy often emphasizes the absence of emotional involvement during intercourse, encouraging mental calmness and exclusive concentration on the practice.¹⁶

The problem with texts that explicitly describe sexual alchemy is that they are exceptionally rare and relatively late, originating mainly during the Ming and Qing dynasties. They occupy a marginal position within the broader tradition of internal alchemy and show little connection to established lineages or commentary traditions. Nevertheless, scholars often use these peripheral texts to interpret self-cultivation methods found in much earlier and more central alchemical works.

Why, then, do mainstream alchemical texts contain no explicit descriptions of sexual practices, prompting scholars to rely on marginal sources as the basis for sexual interpretations? Scholars and practitioners often attribute this absence to the sensitive nature of sexual matters, concerns about transmitting controversial knowledge to unworthy individuals, and potential conflicts with Confucian values. From this perspective, alchemists feared social suppression and ridicule, addressing the topic cautiously by concealing sexual practices and transmitting them only to a select group of trusted disciples under strict secrecy (Liu 1976, 216; Hao 1994, 291). According to this view, sexual alchemy represents an esoteric tradition that disclosed its teachings only when external conditions allowed, particularly in the later imperial and modern periods.

However, this explanation lacks persuasiveness. Considering the vast array of alchemical texts and their diverse nature, the notion that alchemists managed to conceal one of the main sub-traditions for over a thousand years seems more akin to a conspiracy theory than a plausible historical account. It appears to be an attempt to justify the absence of expected content within the texts. Furthermore, there is almost no evidence to support the claim that alchemists sought to deceive Confucian society by

¹⁶ On the theory and practice of sexual alchemy, see e.g., Hao, 1994, 260–303; Hudson 2008, 400–430; Mozias 2020, 157–163; Wile 1992, 146–149.

concealing the true nature of alchemical cultivation. In reality, many alchemists believed that internal alchemy was fully aligned with Confucian values.¹⁷

Furthermore, there is no evidence for the existence of an esoteric tradition centered on sexual alchemy, nor that sexual treatises were inherently secret. All known texts on sexual alchemy – such as those previously mentioned – were published by commercial presses during the Qing period and intended for public circulation, not restricted transmission.

Moreover, this apologetic defense of the idea of sexual alchemy may explain why so-called sexual alchemists did not reveal their secrets, but it still fails to explain why we should interpret specific alchemical scriptures from a sexual perspective when the texts themselves do not provide sufficient evidence to support such an interpretation.

Scholars often base this type of interpretation on a concept frequently found in the works of alchemists identified as proponents of sexual alchemy. According to this view, the physical body is composed entirely of yin and, therefore, cannot be used to achieve immortality without the aid of external medicine (Huo 228–236; Mozias, 2020, 109–113, 122–125). Scholars interpret “external” as referring to a female assistant. However, the term can just as plausibly be understood as referring to spirit, eternal space, primordial void, or other concepts.¹⁸

Although widely accepted among scholars, the concept of sexual alchemy appears to rest on a rather fragile foundation.¹⁹ I believe we should return to the original sources and analyze them on their own terms, without imposing modern preconceptions. However, this is a complex and extensive task that lies largely beyond the scope of this paper and requires further research. This study focuses on one text commonly regarded as part of the sexual alchemy tradition – the *Jindan zhenchuan*.

This is a particularly significant text. It occupies a unique position between marginal works that describe sexual cultivation without ties to established alchemical traditions, and mainstream alchemical texts that omit specific sexual methods. Although the *Jindan zhenchuan* is not affiliated with any well-known alchemical school or lineage, it gave rise to its own tradition, is accompanied by a relatively rich commentary corpus, and is linked to records of practical application.

At the same time, the text explicitly outlines an alchemical process that appears to involve external assistance – possibly including female partners – and can be readily interpreted as a work of sexual alchemy.

Furthermore, several aspects of the concept of sexual alchemy as a strand of alchemical practice may have been shaped or influenced by followers of the *Jindan zhenchuan*. For example, Qiu Zhao’ao was arguably the first alchemist to explicitly embrace the notion of sexual alchemy (Daly 2023, 86–88). Similarly, Fangnei sanren, one of the *Jindan zhenchuan*’s primary commentators, linked its tradition to

¹⁷ For example, Lu Xixing, whom many scholars consider a sexual alchemist (a view I do not agree with), explicitly defines himself as a genuine Confucianist. See Liu, 1976, 122; Mozias 2020, 23–26, 30–32)

¹⁸ See, for example, the teachings of Wang Dongting 汪東停 (1839–1871), the master of the Western School (*xipai* 西派), who understood “external” as external space and developed a system of self-cultivation based on focusing on breathing outside the physical body; see Mozias 2023.

¹⁹ On the critique of the modern scholarly approach to sexual alchemy and the sexual interpretation of alchemical texts, see Daly 2023, 23–98.

the Southern school of internal alchemy. This connection likely contributed to later scholarly associations between sexual alchemy and the Southern school.²⁰

Although the *Jindan zhenchuan* appears to provide evidence for the existence of sexual alchemy, its interpretation remains ambiguous. Some scholars, such as Hudson, classify it as a treatise on sexual alchemy, with Hudson even describing it as an ideal example of sexual alchemy itself (Hudson 2008, 424). Others, like Daly, question this view and argue that the text may instead represent a standard form of internal alchemy (Daly 2023, 76–98). A third perspective, advocated by Hu Fuchen, holds that the text describes a distinct type of alchemical practice known as the “alchemical method of dragon and tiger” (*longhu danfa* 龍虎丹法) (Hu 2009, 271–275).²¹

The *Jindan zhenchuan* occupies a liminal space between two types of literature, which, only when considered together, can form the basis for the concept of sexual alchemy: mainstream alchemical literature employing sexual metaphors and marginal sexual alchemical texts describing specific practices. A careful study of the *Jindan zhenchuan* can offer new perspectives on internal alchemy, challenge key assumptions about the concept and nature of sexual alchemy, question the sexual interpretation of alchemical symbolism, and even undermine the conventional division of alchemy into “sexual” and “pure” traditions.

The Last Hope of Outsiders

First, the *Jindan zhenchuan* challenges the notion of the esoteric nature of sexual alchemy. Its transmission and knowledge-sharing practices stand in stark contrast to those of other alchemical traditions. While most alchemical traditions emphasize the transmission of secret teachings from master to disciple within lineages that trace their origins to immortals and deities, the proponents of the *Jindan zhenchuan* present themselves as outsiders. They do not align with any established alchemical schools or lineages, nor do they claim ties to immortals. Instead, their focus is not so much on transmitting knowledge received from immortals but rather on restoring a connection to the divine realm—returning from the ordinary human world to the transcendent world of immortal existence.

In the history of internal alchemy, knowledge was considered valid only if transmitted by true and accomplished masters who belonged to an authentic line of transmission. Consequently, both alchemists and contemporary scholars tend to depict the history of internal alchemy as the emergence and evolution of various schools and lineages, each tracing its roots back to famous immortals. For example, key alchemical traditions often cite Zhongli Quan 鍾離權 and Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 as their founding figures.

Framing the history of internal alchemy in this manner can be problematic, as many of the lineages were retroactively constructed and did not have a genuine historical basis (Mozias 2020, 4). However, the idea of lineage was vital to the alchemists themselves. When they lacked a connection to an established lineage, alchemists sought alternative ways to link to the divine realm and validate their teachings. Many claimed to receive direct transmissions from immortals through spirit-writing. For instance, the Ming alchemist Lu Xixing recounts meeting Lü Dongbin during spirit-writing sessions and receiving guidance from him (Mozias 2020, 26–30).

²⁰ On the development of the concept of sexual alchemy and its association with the Southern School, see Daly 2023, 99–135.

²¹ I discuss this method of alchemical practice in the second part of the paper.

Additionally, alchemists validated the legitimacy of their teachings through stories of success in practice. They often recounted tales of great masters possessing extraordinary abilities – such as Wang Chongyang visiting his disciples in dreams – or acquiring profound wisdom and knowledge after years of dedicated self-cultivation (Komjathy 2007, 223–224). For instance, Lu Xixing describes how he grasped the essentials of his master’s teachings after years of contemplation and practice. He shares a tale of achievement: while he had not yet attained immortality, he had understood his master’s teachings well enough to pass them on to others (Mozias 2020, 29–30).

The presentation of the transmission of the *Jindan zhenchuan* is notably different. Not only does the text lack any connection to established lineages or immortals, but the proponents of this tradition also made no attempt to retroactively construct such a lineage or link it to immortals and deities. According to Sun Ruzhong, Sun Jiaoluan received alchemical knowledge from a certain Master An 安. However, little is known about Sun Jiaoluan’s master, including his biography, lineage, or whether his alchemical methods originated from any immortal. Furthermore, when Master An met Sun, he appeared to be a novice practitioner, as Sun Ruzhong recounts how his father assisted Master An in his practice from the very beginning (ZWDS 11: 860–861).

Moreover, neither Sun nor his followers attempted to establish connections with immortals through spirit-writing. Although some participated in spirit-writing sessions, these were unrelated to the *Jindan zhenchuan* tradition. For instance, Zheng Guanying, disillusioned with the *Jindan zhenchuan* and its methods, received alchemical knowledge through spirit-writing sessions connected to a different tradition and practice (Lai 2018, 178–180).

The proponents of this tradition also did not attempt to legitimize their path by recounting stories of success in practice. On the contrary, Sun Ruzhong and his followers emphasized failures and misfortunes. Although Master An experienced some degree of success in his practice, Sun Jiaoluan faced complete failure. For many years, Sun sought companions to assist him in his practice, but his efforts were in vain. Ultimately, he had no choice but to pass down his method to his son – a practice typically discouraged in internal alchemy – but this too failed to produce any positive results (ZWDS 11: 860–861).

Sun Ruzhong, unexpectedly becoming his father’s disciple, compiled the *Jindan zhenchuan*, thereby preserving Sun Jiaoluan’s teachings. However, he remains silent about his own practice: whether he succeeded or even engaged in internal alchemy at all. Furthermore, little is known about the two other commentators mentioned in the text.

The same holds true for other adherents of this tradition. While Qiu Zhao’ao and Tao Susi were esteemed intellectuals and commentators on alchemical scriptures, there is no record of their successes in practice. Chen Yingning even suggests that they lacked any practical experience altogether (Zhiji zi 2011, 539). Zheng Guanying frequently mentions practitioners of the *Jindan zhenchuan*’s method, yet he also highlights their failures. Even in describing the practices of his master and a prominent commentator on the *Jindan zhenchuan*, Fangnei sanren, Zheng acknowledges that the actual outcomes of his practice fell short of the descriptions in the treatise (Zheng Guanying 2015, 76).

It seems that the proponents of the text’s teachings emphasized their normalcy and connection to the ordinary world – it originated from ordinary people, was practiced by ordinary people, and was therefore suitable for ordinary practitioners. In doing so, they employed a validation strategy opposite to that of other alchemists, who emphasized their connection to the divine realm.

The reason for this likely lies in the social status of the text's proponents. Many of the well-known followers of the *Jindan zhenchuan* were from a specific social stratum, including scholar-officials who held relatively high positions within the political hierarchy. Others, such as Zheng Guanying and his associates, while not government officials, were affluent individuals of high social standing. None of them were affiliated with Daoist institutions, and some even openly expressed disbelief in gods and immortals. Additionally, they tended to be older. Indeed, both proponents of the method, like Fangnei sanren, and its critics, such as Wang Dongting 汪東亭 (1839–1917), believed that this method was primarily practiced by older individuals, often seen as a final effort to overcome mortality (Fangnei sanren 2010, 65; Chen and Zhang 2010, 279).²²

Although older individuals and scholar-officials were widely present in other alchemical traditions, and affiliations with Daoist institutions could be ambiguous, the key point is how the followers of this text positioned themselves. They did not approach internal alchemy as insiders transmitting secret knowledge but as outsiders exploring alchemical mysteries with the aim of reconnecting with the sacred Daoist realm. Consequently, the proponents of this text describe the transmission and practice of its methods as the pursuit of wealthy and elderly outsiders seeking to access the divine world of alchemical cultivation.

Historically, the *Jindan zhenchuan* functioned as an entry point into alchemical cultivation, bridging the gap between the ordinary world and the realm of immortality practice. Practitioners of the text's teachings usually faced one of two outcomes: either they failed to achieve their goals, or, after becoming acquainted with internal alchemy, they moved on to other alchemical methods.

Thus, Li Xiyue, introduced to internal alchemy by his master – who was allegedly part of Sun Jiaoluan's lineage – later encountered Lü Dongbin through spirit-writing sessions (Mozias 2020, 36–38). Li claims to be a direct disciple of Lü Dongbin, deriving his credibility as an alchemical adept from Lü rather than from Sun's lineage. His practice diverges from that of Sun. Similarly, Zheng Guanying, disillusioned with the *Jindan zhenchuan* method, sought out a different master and received teachings through spirit-writing sessions (Lai 2018, 180–185).

The surge in the popularity of the scripture during the latter half of the 19th century, followed by its subsequent decline, could be attributed to similar factors. In the 19th century, there was a growing interest in internal alchemy. However, many key alchemical texts were not widely accessible, making it challenging for outsiders to comprehend and practice alchemy.

In this context, the *Jindan zhenchuan* provided a comprehensible explanation of the alchemical practice and a relatively structured method. However, as more alchemical texts became available and understanding of alchemical principles deepened, people transitioned to more nuanced and profound alchemical methods. Even proponents of sexual alchemy began to view the *Jindan zhenchuan* doctrine as crude, lacking sophistication, and ultimately incorrect (Liu 1976, 203–331).

Hence, the *Jindan zhenchuan* does not primarily unveil previously concealed esoteric knowledge to the broader world. Instead, it reflects the endeavor of outsiders, disconnected from the alchemical tradition and its understanding, to penetrate the enigmatic domain of internal alchemy. It embodies the aspiration of those without ties to the realm of gods and immortals to re-enter the sacred world.

²² Wang Dongting is an influential master of the Western school of internal alchemy. See Mozias 2023, 97–135.

Interestingly, while the text's description of its transmission emphasizes a connection to the ordinary world, the text itself is more closely tied to the divine realm than any other alchemical work.

The Path to Mount Kunlun

The *Jindan zhenchuan* not only challenges the concept of sexual alchemy but also many of our broader assumptions about internal alchemy. Internal alchemy is often depicted by scholars and modern practitioners as a “rational,” materialistic, and almost scientific practice, seemingly devoid of any connection to religious “superstitions.”

This perspective is partially supported by many traditional alchemical treatises. While the ultimate goal – immortality – carries a religious dimension, it is generally framed in abstract and philosophical terms. The practice is typically presented as an individual effort, based on the manipulation of fundamental aspects of human life rather than reliance on divine intervention. Descriptions of alchemical cultivation often culminate in the formation of the yang spirit or outline subsequent stages in abstract terms, such as unifying with emptiness (*hexu* 合虛) and unifying with the Dao (*hedao* 合道) (Wang 2011, 109–118).

In contrast, the *Jindan zhenchuan* is distinctly a religious text. It portrays the ultimate goal of its practices as unification with the gods on Mount Kunlun and emphasizes the necessity of divine assistance to achieve this.

The text outlines the alchemical practice in nine steps. The first six resemble the typical stages of internal alchemy, though they include elements that could be interpreted as referring to sexual alchemy.

Practitioners begin by laying the foundation (*zhuji* 築基) – a stage focused on replenishing blood and qi, likely with the aid of external female partners (ZWDS 11: 862.1b–863.1b). They then move to the stage of gathering the medicine (*deyao* 得藥). This medicine, often described as an external medicine (*waiyao* 外藥), refers to former-heaven (*xiantian* 先天) or primordial qi (*yuanqi* 元氣) – the original qi believed to exist prior to the formation of the cosmos and human birth.

This primordial qi is said to be generated by a latter-heaven cauldron (*houtian ding* 後天鼎), a term which may also allude to the role of a female. Practitioners draw this external qi into themselves and merge it with the replenished blood and qi from the previous stage. This unified substance is then refined into genuine mercury (*zhen gong* 真汞), serves as the catalyst for future self-transformation (ZWDS 11: 863.2a–864.1b).

Thereafter, practitioners focus the mind on the medicine obtained in the previous stage, coalescing it into the elixir (*jiedan* 結丹) in the lower elixir field beneath the abdomen. Completion of these initial stages grants the practitioners the status of human immortals (*renxian* 人仙) (ZWDS 11: 864.2a–865.1b).

Next, adepts proceed to refine the self (*lianji* 煉己), which the text interprets as refining the elixir formed in the previous stage. Practitioners do this by extinguishing all remaining yin elements. This involves eliminating ordinary desires and cravings, ultimately leading to physical transformation: the blood turns white, and bodily fluids and skin take on a jade-like quality. Practitioners achieve this by eradicating desire within desire, a process that may still involve female partners at this stage (ZWDS 11: 865.1b–866.1a).

In the fifth stage of the practice, practitioners reverse the elixir (*huandan* 還丹) by relocating it to the Palace of [the trigram] Qian (*qiangong* 乾宮), which is most likely located in the head or, more generally, in the upper part of the body. In this process, they give birth to the sagely embryo (*shengtai* 聖胎) (ZWDS 11: 866.1a–867.2b). In the sixth stage, they nourish it (*wenyang* 溫養), preparing it for departure from the physical body. Upon completing these three stages, adepts attain the status of earthly immortals (*dixian* 地仙) (ZWDS 11: 867.2b–869.1b).

The distinctive feature of this practice blueprint is its final three stages, which unfold in the divine realm. First, the yang spirit of practitioners undergoes delivery (*tuotai* 脫胎), separating from the physical body (ZWDS 11: 869.1b–870.1a). After leaving the body, they are protected by divine beings. They then acquire the mysterious pearl (*xuanzhu* 玄珠) and, with the assistance of divine beings, form a genuine immortal body (ZWDS 11: 870.1a–871.1a). Subsequently, they journey to the Jade Lake (*fu yaochi* 赴瑤池) on the legendary Mount Kunlun 崑崙山, where they encounter the Queen Mother of the West, Xiwangmu 西王母 (ZWDS 11: 871.1a–871.2b).²³ Through this process, adepts ascend to become heavenly immortals (*tianxian* 天仙), thus fulfilling the path of self-transformation.

The practice diverges from most other alchemical systems. Typically, alchemists form the elixir in the lower elixir field, then move it to the middle elixir field near the heart, and finally to the upper elixir field in the head (Mozias 2020, 197–203; Wang 2011, 21–24, 102). The *Jindan zhenchuan*, however, omits the stage involving the middle elixir field.

Instead, it organizes the process differently. Practitioners begin their journey in the ordinary world of desires, and in the first three stages, they focus on obtaining the medicine from external partners and forming the elixir in the lower elixir field. During the next three stages, alchemists refine the elixir within the adept's body, eliminate remaining desires, move the elixir to the upper elixir field, and prepare it for “delivery.”

In the final three stages, the practitioner's spirit – referred to as the yang-spirit – leaves the physical body, forms an immortal body, and unites with the divine realm.

The first three and the last three stages involve active engagement with the external world. The difference lies in the nature of that engagement: the early stages are rooted in the human world of ordinary experience, while the final stages unfold in the sacred realm of the gods. Stages four through six serve as a transitional phase between these two worlds.

Thus, the *Jindan zhenchuan* unequivocally states its religious aim: achieving salvation by attaining membership in the immortal realm atop Mount Kunlun. It offers practitioners a promise – a journey from initial disconnection to eventual reunion with the sacred and immortal. Given the social background and age of its followers, they may not harbor much hope of transcending the ordinary world. However, they cling to the possibility of achieving it in the divine realm, even with divine

²³The Queen Mother of the West (Xiwang mu 西王母) is an ancient goddess whose origins predate the organized Daoist religion, yet she continues to hold a prominent place in both religious practices and popular culture to this day. She is particularly renowned for the Peach Festival (*pantao hui* 蟠桃會), where she is said to distribute magical peaches that grant immortality and transcendence. Traditionally, she is believed to reside on the mythical Mount Kunlun, considered the axis mundi in ancient Chinese cosmology. The Jade Lake (*yaochi* 瑤池) on Mount Kunlun is where the Peach Festival takes place. For more on the Queen Mother of the West, see Cahill 1993; Yoshikawa 2008, 1119–1120. On Mount Kunlun, see also, Smith 2008, 602–604.

assistance. The initial six stages of practice seem akin to preparing for the climactic act of a religious drama unfolding in the divine realm.

Moreover, adepts not only ascend to the divine realm but also continue their self-cultivation there. The *Jindan zhenchuan* does not explicitly provide instructions on how to cultivate in the divine realm. After all, is it even possible to instruct those who have already become immortals on how to behave and practice in the divine world? Instead, it illustrates how this self-cultivation unfolds, offering an idealized model of practice that reflects how cultivation appears in an ideal world. This model serves as a blueprint for alchemical practice, adaptable to the imperfect circumstances of the ordinary world. Understanding this model is crucial for interpreting the self-cultivation method outlined in the *Jindan zhenchuan*, particularly its characteristic use of assistants and companions.

Conclusion

The concept of sexual alchemy, which involves interpreting alchemical metaphors and symbols in a literal sense, gained popularity towards the end of the 19th century and has been accepted in scholarly literature ever since. However, this interpretation faces a significant challenge due to the lack of sufficient textual evidence to support it. Scholars and modern practitioners attempt to address this issue by suggesting that sexual alchemy was an esoteric tradition, kept secret until recent times. They argue that it was only hinted at in a few traditional texts and fully revealed in modern times.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* is one of the few traditional texts that clearly indicates some form of dual, possibly sexual cultivation. It also possesses a commentary tradition and evidence of its use in real self-cultivation practices. Therefore, it holds a central position in the study of sexual alchemy, particularly in the history of this concept.

However, a careful study of this text could lead to questioning some fundamental premises regarding sexual alchemy. First, it is likely not an esoteric text revealing previously concealed secret knowledge. Instead, it appears to be an interpretation of alchemical texts by members of the educated elite who attempted to understand alchemical knowledge but may not have had access to its genuine representation. The sexual interpretation of alchemical texts was probably just that – an interpretation of sexual metaphors by individuals who, like modern readers, did not fully understand them. In other words, it was likely not a revelation but a misinterpretation.

Finally, the text has a clear religious aim and promise – the unification of an adept with gods on Mount Kunlun. This seemingly contradicts modern attempts to depict sexual alchemy as a physiological, materialistic, quasi-scientific practice. Of course, the religious nature of the text does not directly contradict its possible sexual interpretation. However, it allows us to analyze the text and the practice it describes from an entirely different perspective – not as sexual cultivation, but as a kind of communal religious practice. I present this perspective in the second part of the paper.

Abbreviations

ZWDS-Zangwai daoshu 藏外道書 (Daoist Texts outside the Canon), 36 vols.1992–1994. Chengdu: Ba-Shu shushe.

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