

## 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 II<sup>1</sup>

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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 Two: Communal Cultivation

The *Jindan zhenchuan* 金丹真傳 (Perfect Transmission of the Golden Elixir), written during the late Ming dynasty, is often regarded as a key text on sexual alchemy. Sexual alchemy typically relies on the literal interpretation of alchemical sexual metaphors, positing that sexual interaction with female partners is essential for creating an immortal body. While modern scholarship broadly accepts the existence of sexual alchemy, this view is based on tenuous evidence, with the *Jindan zhenchuan* frequently cited as primary sources. However, I argue that the text does not primarily focus on sexual alchemy but rather illuminates aspects of the alchemical tradition often overlooked, such as communal practice.

This is the second part of a two-part series on the *Jindan zhenchuan*. In the first part, I examine the theory and history of sexual alchemy, highlighting its problematic nature. I also provide an account of the *Jindan zhenchuan*'s history, its community, and its followers, demonstrating that it is not an esoteric text disclosing secret knowledge. Rather, it represents an effort by outsiders to reconnect with alchemical traditions, self-cultivation, religious practice, and the divine. I further argue that it is a religious text, centered on the final unification of the practitioner with the divine realm on Mount Kunlun.

### Introduction

In this second part, I analyze the alchemical practices described in the text. I show that the final three sages in its nine-stage practice, which occurs in the divine world, present an ideal model of self-cultivation. This model comprises three core components: the practitioner's spiritual self-cultivation, the use of divine assistance to form the immortal body, and the connection with the two divine forces that govern the universe. In the mortal world, this ideal practice manifests through two simultaneous processes: spiritual self-cultivation and the formation of an external body with the aid of external assistance.

I explain how the mother's blood and father's qi are regarded as earthly manifestations of ultimate divine forces, and how practitioners replenish these forces with external assistance. The method, known as "sex at a distance," involves no physical contact. I describe how adepts use a unique instrument called a *tuoye* to facilitate this practice. The *Jindan zhenchuan* also emphasizes the role of the alchemical community, including female (and possibly male) assistants, in replenishing blood and qi. I stress the central role that like-minded male companions play in replicating the ebb and flow of yin and yang using the blood and qi of their assistants, thereby creating a communal body of practice.

I further explain that, as the community forms a collective body, practitioners enter deep meditation, losing awareness of the external world while perceiving the ebb and flow of yin and yang as though it were their own body.

While scholars often interpret the *Jindan zhenchuan* as a text on sexual alchemy, it likely represents something broader. It is a religious text that underscores the central role of communal practice in the alchemical work and raises significant questions about the concept of the body in internal alchemy – one that may diverge from the conventional understanding of the physical body – and the religious nature of internal alchemy itself.

## The Perfect Model

A third of the *Jindan zhenchuan* focuses on cultivation in the divine realm, emphasizing its core goal: salvation through integration into the divine society on Mount Kunlun. Self-cultivation in the immortal realm serves as an idealized model for alchemical practice in the mortal world, highlighting key principles such as spirit cultivation, the formation of an immortal body with external assistance, and the practitioner's connection to two primary divine forces.

The text suggests that the primary aim of alchemical cultivation in the mortal world is the cultivation of the spirit, preparing it to leave the physical body and complete the practice in the divine realm. It describes the practitioner's new self as it departs from the physical body as follows:

Spirit is said to be formless and without substance; it can penetrate stone and gold, so why can it not reside in the Crimson Palace or reach the Muddy Pellet? When the crown gate cracks, it is precisely the time when the dragon child leaves the womb.<sup>2</sup> The yang spirit appears, called the genuine man, and then the yin demons and ghost villains transform into protectors of the law; the inhabitants of the three divisions and Eight Eulogies become gods and sages; the thirty-six thousand radiant spirits transform into divine soldiers.<sup>3</sup> The black records are cleared of his names, and in the red book, annotations are made. Would the Highest Thearch not know his name?<sup>4</sup>

This passage explains that alchemists focus on nurturing the formless and incorporeal spirit. Because it is intangible, the spirit resides in the middle elixir field (Crimson Palace) near the heart, ascends to the upper elixir field (the Muddy Pellet) in the head, and ultimately departs through a fissure at the crown. The spirit's departure from the body represents the yang-spirit (*yangshen* 陽神), the new immortal body and ultimate goal of alchemical cultivation (Komjathy 2007, 219–220; Mozias 2020, 115–131).

The yang-spirit is portrayed with a religious tone. As it emerges, the practitioner gains divine protection from gods and demons, transforming into divine soldiers, and becomes visible to the Highest Thearch, who removes their name from the Book of Death and inscribes it in the Book of Life. This emphasizes the vital role of divine assistance in attaining immortality.

Divine aid is also essential in forming the new immortal body. The yang-spirit alone does not achieve true immortality; it must absorb the Mysterious Pearl, a divine medicine given by Heaven with the help of celestial beings. The text elaborates on this process as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> See descriptions of the yang-spirit, representing the new immortal body, leaving the practitioner's physical body through the crown of the head in Eskildsen 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Protectors of the Law (*hufa* 護法) are divine beings who safeguard the Dharma through their spiritual power. For more details, see e.g., <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E8%AD%B7%E6%B3%95>. The gods of the "Three Divisions and Eight Eulogies" (*sanbu bajing* 三部八景) are corporeal spirits residing in specific locations within the practitioner's body, connecting them to the immortal realm. These deities were particularly prominent in the practices of the Shangqing school. See Robinet 2008, 210–211.

<sup>4</sup> 神者，無方無體之謂，即金石可穿，而何絳宮不可住，泥丸不可到也？頂門進裂，正龍子脫胎之時。陽神出現，號為真人，則陰魔鬼賊，化為護法；三部八景，化為神聖；三萬六千精光，化為神兵矣，黑籍除名，丹書注字，上帝豈不知名字乎？(ZWDS 11: 86g.2a).

Those who adhere to the Dao, even with noble aspirations for the Mysterious Pearl, find it difficult to encounter the marvelous cauldron. So, how can they obtain the Mysterious Pearl and absorb it? Indeed, it is the Mysterious Pearl, bestowed by Heaven and sensed by humans.<sup>5</sup>

Heaven grants the Mysterious Pearl, the foundation of the immortal body, as an act of benevolence, rewarding practitioners according to their moral virtues. Adepts may perceive it, but they cannot produce it independently.

Alchemical practice culminates in ultimate salvation when the practitioner joins the feast at the Jade Pool on Mount Kunlun, entering the Celestial realm under the rule of the Queen Mother of the West:

The Jade Pool is the garden of Kunlun, the orchard of Langfeng.<sup>6</sup> It is the realm where the Queen Mother resides. In the beginning of heaven and earth, no humans originally existed. The Eastern Qi of Wood coalesced into a Celestial Immortal named The Lord of Wood, and the Western Qi of Metal coalesced into a Celestial Immortal named the Mother of Metal.<sup>7</sup> After the two immortals descended, they gave birth to twenty-eight daughters, and from this, humanity flourished, and the division between immortals and mortals began. These two immortals are the ancestors of all beings from ancient times to the present.<sup>8</sup>

The highest achievement in alchemical practice is communion with the two forces that shape human existence and destiny: the Qi of Wood, embodied by the Lord of the Wood, and the Qi of Metal, personified by the Queen Mother of the West – divine manifestations of yin and yang. This union represents the ideal interaction between practitioners and the cosmic forces governing the universe. Though beyond ordinary reach, these forces permeate daily life, manifesting as qi, blood, essence, and spirit inherited from one's parents. Alchemy seeks to recognize and harness them. The text elaborates on this as follows:

Alas, though the Jade Pool remains beyond the reach of those with ordinary bones, the Tathagata Shakyamuni did not emerge from the earth, and did Guangcheng and Laozi come from the heavens?<sup>9</sup> In conclusion, the generation of qi, blood, essence, and spirit by ordinary parents is not

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<sup>5</sup> 有道之士，即雅志玄珠，而妙鼎難值，亦安得而餌之？蓋是玄珠也，其賜在天，其感在人。(ZWDS 11: 870.2a–2b).

<sup>6</sup> The Orchard of Langfeng (Langfeng yuan 閩風苑), also known as Langfeng Peak (Langfeng dian 閩風巔), is one of the peaks on Mount Kunlun where the Queen Mother of the West and other gods are said to reside. See Smith, 2008, 603.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord of Wood (Mugong 木公), also known as the King Lord of the East (Dongwang gong 東王公), emerged as the male counterpart to the Queen Mother of the West starting from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). See Yoshikawa 2008, 1120.

<sup>8</sup> 瑤池者，崑崙之圃也，閩風之苑，王母所居之境也。天地之處，原未有人，東方木炁，結一天仙，名曰木公；西方金炁，結一天仙，名曰金母。二仙既降，誕生二十八女，而人類由茲一繁，仙凡由茲以判。是二仙者，古今人物之大父母也。(ZWDS 11: 871.1b).

<sup>9</sup> Guangcheng zi 廣成子 is a legendary immortal mostly famous for instructing the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 in the art of achieving immortality. See Penny 2008, 457–458.

different from magnificent great Dao. Each person can achieve completeness, and the radiant Golden Elixir is something everyone can partake in.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, the *Jindan zhenchuan* emphasizes the crucial role of divine assistance throughout the alchemical journey. Adepts interact with Heaven through divine beings, as primary cosmic forces appear as grand Celestial immortals. These same forces shape the mundane world, manifesting in human life as blood and qi. Alchemical cultivation follows the same core principles – self-cultivating the spirit while forming a new body with external support. The key difference lies in the source of assistance: immortals aid adepts in the divine realm, while fellow humans provide support in the mortal world.

### The Dual Cultivation of the Spirit and External Body

The text outlines the ideal cultivation model in the immortal realm, focusing on two key practices: refining the adept's spirit and creating an immortal body with divine aid. In the mortal world, this model reinterprets the trigrams Kan ☵ and Li ☲, the core formula of alchemical cultivation. In the *Jindan zhenchuan*, Li represents self-cultivation of spirit, while Kan signifies forming an external body with human assistance, both unfolding simultaneously.

The theory of sexual cultivation hinges on interpreting the trigram Li as male and the trigram Kan as female, with their relationship symbolizing sexual intercourse. However, the *Jindan zhenchuan* offers a different interpretation:

Regarding the self, outwardly, it is yang, while inwardly, it is yin, belonging to the trigram Li. Internally, it consists only of essence and spirit. Regarding the other, outwardly, it is yin, while inwardly, it is yang, belonging to the trigram Kan. Internally, it consists only of qi and blood. Bring the qi and blood of the other, use the method to chase it back, gather it in the Yellow Court Palace,<sup>11</sup> match it with my essence and spirit, and refine it into one entity. It is called the fusion of the Four Images.<sup>12</sup>

Li represents the self, with its central yin line symbolizing essence and spirit; Kan represents the other, with its central yang line corresponding to qi and blood. The practice unites the qi and blood of the other with the essence and qi of the self, transforming Li into the fully yang trigram Qian and symbolically restoring the self to a pure yang state.

Scholars often interpret “self” and “other” as referring to practitioners and sexual partners, respectively (Wile 1992, 150). However, within the context of the *Jindan zhenchuan*, this interpretation seems inaccurate. The text appears to follow a more traditional understanding, where Li and “self” refer

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<sup>10</sup> 嗟嗟，瑤池雖然非俗骨可到，而釋迦如來不從地湧，廣成老子豈自天來？總之，凡父凡母之生成氣血精神，以無異巍巍大道，個個圓成，燁燁金丹，人人可餌。(ZWDS 11: 871.2a).

<sup>11</sup> The Yellow Court (*huangting* 黃庭) refers to a central location within the body where a practitioner's essence, qi, and spirit merge to form the sacred embryo. Its exact placement varies depending on the specific context, but it is often associated with the lower elixir field in the abdomen or the middle elixir field beneath the heart.

<sup>12</sup> 夫己者，外陽而內陰，其卦屬離，在內者精神而已；彼者，外陰而內陽，其卦屬坎，在內者氣血而已，將彼氣血，以法追來，收入黃庭宮內，配我精神，煉作一家，名為四像和合。(ZWDS 11: 873.1b–2a).

to the spirit, and Kan and “other” refer to the body. At the same time, the interpretation presented in the *Jindan zhenchuan* is far from conventional. It uniquely distinguishes between what is inherent to the practitioner and what is sourced externally – from another person. Qiu Zhao’ao explains the reasoning behind this approach as follows:

Initially, the terms “body” and “mind” each belong to two distinct houses, namely “Kan” and “Li.” If speaking about one person, the mind is inside, and the body is outside. From the perspective of two people, “this” is the mind, and “that” is the body.<sup>13</sup>

The *Jindan Zhenchuan* presents a unique interpretation of “dual cultivation” (*shuangxiu* 雙修), diverging from both its traditional and sexual meanings. Typically, dual cultivation refers to the simultaneous refinement of inner nature and life (*xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修) or the mind and body.<sup>14</sup> In sexual alchemy, this principle involves interaction between a male and a female. However, the *Jindan Zhenchuan* redefines it as the simultaneous cultivation of the practitioner’s own spirit and an external body, a process that necessarily involves other humans. But what exactly is this external body, how is it cultivated, and how does it differ from sexual practice?

### **Mother’s Blood, Father’s qi**

In forming the external body, the *Jindan zhenchuan* mirrors the interactions between an adept and divine beings in the immortal realm. It shows how to harness the power of two universal forces – the qi of the Queen Mother of the West and the Lord of the Wood – which manifest in the mortal world as the mother’s blood and the father’s qi. Since the primordial creative power of the parents’ blood is lost after puberty, practitioners use external help to replicate it, reestablishing their connection to the ultimate divine force. Therefore, practitioners imitate not the relationship between sexual partners but the bond between a child and their parents.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* describes human birth and development through the mother’s blood and the father’s qi as follows:

Humans receive the essence from the father and blood from the mother to form the body, which gradually takes form after conception. At the moment of taking form, the father’s essence is stored in the kidneys, and the mother’s blood is stored in the heart. The vessels of the heart and kidneys are connected, and following the mother’s breath, the essence and blood give birth to each other, accumulating until the tenth month, when the essence becomes full, weighing about one “liang.” The blood then circulates throughout the body, and [a child] leaves a mother’s womb.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>原來身心二字，乃分屬坎離二家。以一人言，心內而身外；以兩人言，此心而彼身也。(Zhiji zi 2011, 519).

<sup>14</sup> On the principle of dual cultivation, see Ge 2001, 79–151; Mozias 2020, 103–106; Robinet 2008, 1103–1105.

<sup>15</sup> 人稟父精母血以成身，網緼之後，漸次成形。成形之際，父精藏於腎。母血藏於心。心腎脈連，隨母呼吸，精血互生，積至十月，精滿一兩，血周遍身，脫離母腹矣。(ZWDS 11: 862.2a).

A practitioner inherits blood and qi from his parents, which remain within the body after conception, interacting to foster fetal development. Following birth, a child continues to receive the essence of yin and yang externally through breastfeeding. The text explains:

After birth, what feeds one is the mother's milk. Milk should originally follow the monthly tide, carrying qi upward, changing from red to white, thus transforming yin into yang. The milk contains the essence of yin and yang; thus, when infants are breastfed, the essence grows following the yang, and the blood is born following the yin.<sup>16</sup>

When the text mentions maternal blood and paternal qi, it does not refer to specific physical phenomena but to the yin and yang substances that shape the human body in various forms. Blood and qi, representing these forces, originate externally from one's parents and govern growth and development. This creative power remains active in the body until puberty, after which it gradually depletes, ultimately leading to death. The *Jindan zhenchuan* elaborates on this process:

From this moment forward, knowledge dawns, and emotions arise. The essence, when reaching fullness, cannot sustain itself, and the spirit, when reaching completeness, cannot hold itself. One takes delusion as the norm, finds pleasure in suffering, and engages in activities day and night – all of which deplete the essence and blood. As the pure body gradually depletes, the central line of Qian enters the Kun palace, becoming void and transforming into the Li trigram; this is called inferior virtue.<sup>17</sup>

The power that sustains human body comes from external sources and cannot be self-generated. In the divine realm, immortals receive their bodies from Heaven; in the mortal world, they come from parents. Similarly, adepts must replenish their blood and qi by drawing from others. The text expands on this concept:

Blood belongs to yin, while qi belongs to yang, both originating from the outside; they must be pursued and captured, then passed to the elixir field. The self is represented by the trigram Li, with the central line in the trigram Li becoming void, symbolizing yin. The other is represented by the trigram Kan, with the central line in the trigram Kan becoming solid, symbolizing yang. Pursue the qi and blood of the other, inserting them into my elixir field. It replenishes the trigram Li by taking the central line from the trigram Kan.<sup>18</sup>

Both yin and yang elements – blood and qi – originate externally, which may invite a sexual interpretation of the practice. However, unlike sexual alchemy, the *Jindan zhenchuan* models its

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<sup>16</sup> 既生之後，所哺者，母者乳也。乳本應月潮，載氣上升，變紅而白，則陰變為陽矣。乳含陰陽之精，故嬰孩哺之，而精遂陽長，血遂陰生。(ZWDS 11: 862.2a).

<sup>17</sup> 自是知啟情生，精滿不能自持，神完不能自固，以妄為常，以苦為樂，日用夜作，皆損精損血之事。而純體隧虧，乾之中爻走入坤宮，虛而成離，是名下德。(ZWDS 11: 862.2b).

<sup>18</sup> 血屬陰，氣屬陽，俱從外來，必須追取，乃過丹田。己為離，離之中爻虛而為陰；彼為坎，坎之中爻實而為陽，追彼氣血，入我丹田，是為填離取坎。(ZWDS 11: 862.1b).

approach on the parent-child relationship rather than male-female interactions. Like a fetus in the womb or a breastfeeding child, the practitioner relies entirely on external support. Moreover, maternal blood and paternal qi symbolize the qi of the Queen Mother of the West and the Lord of the Wood, representing divine creative forces in the mortal world. By replicating the parent-child bond, this practice reconnects the practitioner with these ultimate forces. Alchemists achieve this through a communal body formed by companions and assistants, where the practitioner assumes the role of the “child” and the collective acts as the “parents.”

### Sex at a Distance

The practice in the *Jindan zhenchuan* might seem like “sexual alchemy” since practitioners must replenish “blood and qi” from external sources, potentially implying female sexual partners. However, while adepts create the elixir “within the chamber,” a term often linked to sexual practices, the text explicitly states it has “nothing to do with riding a female or engaging in plucking battles” (ZWDS 11:863.1b).

This raises the question: does it forbid all sexual interaction or only certain harmful practices? While many scholars favor the latter interpretation, the logic of the practice – modeled on a parent-child relationship rather than a sexual one – suggests it does not involve sexual intercourse in alchemical cultivation.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* consistently emphasizes that while external assistance is necessary, alchemical cultivation does not involve direct physical contact, a method known as “sex at a distance.” A key passage in the treatise describes the practice:

When replenishing them [blood and qi], the spirits intermingle, but the flesh does not; the qi intermingles, but the physical forms do not. Although they intermingle, it is as if they don't. Instead, one takes the other's blood and qi, gathers it through the method, and fuses it with two images of “my” essence and spirit so that they coalesce into oneness.<sup>19</sup>

The passage states that while the spirit and qi of assistants and practitioners intermingle, their bodies do not. However, not all scholars interpret this text in the same way. For example, Hudson focuses on the phrase “although they intermingle, it is as if they do not,” suggesting it refers to engaging in sexual activity without emotional engagement (Hudson 2008, 424). Physical interaction occurs, but practitioners maintain a detached state.

Some 19<sup>th</sup>-century alchemists may have interpreted the *Jindan zhenchuan* method in this manner, as evidenced by the writings of Fangnei Sanren, who contested this understanding (Fangnei sanren 2010, 40–41).

However, such an interpretation of the text seems unlikely. The treatise explicitly states that no physical contact occurs, as bodies and forms do not intermingle. Other passages in the *Jindan zhenchuan* further confirm the absence of actual sexual interactions:

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<sup>19</sup> 補之之時，神交體不交，氣交形不交，雖交以不交，却將彼血氣用法收來，與我精神兩相湊合，而凝結為一。(ZWDS 11:863.1b).



What are the cauldron and vessel? They are none other than what the *Wuzhen pian* calls the “Numinous Father and Sagely Mother.”<sup>20</sup> When used, the spirits intermingle, but the flesh does not; the qi intermingles, but the forms do not. Men do not loosen their clothes; women do not untie their belts. Reverence them as divine beings, love them as parents, and, while remaining silent and unmoved, sensing and then responding, this is it.<sup>21</sup>

The *Jindan zhenchuan* emphasizes that practitioners remain clothed and avoid physical contact during practice. It also stresses treating assistants with reverence, akin to divine beings and parents. This not only negates any sexual implication but also highlights the assistants’ role – by supplying blood and qi, they mirror divine beings in the celestial realm and parents in the birth process. Therefore, they should be regarded as parental figures, not sexual partners, and treated accordingly.

The most significant commentators on the text also suggested that the practice does not necessitate sexual contact. Fangnei Sanren, for instance, writes:

They don’t know that in order to form the great elixir consisting of yin and yang, one should focus on extracting former-heaven void qi. What is seen is not used, and what is used is not seen; the bodies separate, but the spirits intermingle. Revere them like a mother, fear them like a tiger. Even though yin and yang are used, [the practice] remains pure and completely free from any contamination.<sup>22</sup>

The commentator emphasizes that the practice solely entails spiritual contact while the bodies remain separate. Despite the involvement of yin and yang (interaction with female assistants), it is no different from pure cultivation. The term “contamination” typically implies sexual interaction, and its absence indicates that this method involves no sexual contact whatsoever, not just specific sexual techniques.

Even one of the staunchest critics of Sun Jiaoluan’s self-cultivation method, Wang Dongting, the master of the Western School of internal alchemy, does not suggest that it involves physical, sexual relations. He writes:

If one says, “The spirits intermingle, but the bodies do not; the qi intermingles, but the forms do not,” then I ask, “When entering the chamber if one’s mind remains undisturbed, can the yang (penis) become hard? If one asks, “Men do not loosen their clothes, women do not untie their belts,” then I ask: when passing the *qi*, if a woman does not remove her pants, from where does

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<sup>20</sup> The phrase “Numinous Father and Sagely Mother” (lingfu shengmu 靈父聖母) appears in the commentary to the *Wuzhen pian* written by Chen Zhixu. This commentary is included in the *Wuzhen pian sanzhu* 悟真篇三注 (Three Commentaries to the *Wuzhen pian*). See DZ 142, *Ziyang Zhenren Wuzhen pian sanzhu* 3.1b3–4. These terms are simply synonyms for genuine yin and genuine yang.

<sup>21</sup> 鼎器者何？即“悟真”云“靈父聖母”也。其用之時，神交體不交，氣交形不交。男不寬衣服，女不解帶，敬如神明，愛如父母，寂然不動，感而隨通者，此也。(ZWDS 11: 873.1a).

<sup>22</sup> 不知陰陽二品大丹，專取先天虛無之氣，見之不用，用之不見，體隔神交，敬之如母，畏之如虎，雖用陰陽，乃然清淨，絕無沾染之事。(Fangnei sanren 2010, 53).

the “tuoyue” enter the yin opening (vulva)? If a man does not remove his pants, from where does the yang object (penis) insert into the “tuoyue?”<sup>23</sup>

Wang does not critique the followers of Sun’s method for engaging in illicit sexual activities. From the above, it follows that proponents of this practice are instructed not to undress, maintain composure, and, instead of physical intercourse, engage in some form of “sex at a distance” practice.

Wang argues this approach is unfeasible. The mere presence of a female could disrupt a male practitioner’s composure, leading to intercourse, which contradicts the practice’s principles. Conversely, without undressing or sexual activity, achieving the necessary physical responses (e.g., erection) would be impossible. While Wang finds the practice absurd, he acknowledges it does not involve intercourse.

He further explains how proponents conducted intermingling at a distance, using an instrument called the *tuoyue*. This tool appears to be a crucial component of the practice, as described in the *Jindan zhenchuan*.

### Tuoyue

How can the interaction between practitioners and assistants occur without physical contact, given that replenishing a practitioner’s body with blood and qi from assistants is crucial from the very first stage of establishing the foundation, as the *Jindan zhenchuan* asserts? The text maintains that it could be done with the help of *tuoyue*:

If you ask about establishing the foundation, understanding the *tuoyue* and the Mysterious Pass is essential. Pursue the “other’s” qi and blood to enter the elixir field; this is precisely what extracting from Kan to replenish the Li means.<sup>24</sup>

The text here mentions the *tuoyue* 橐籥, which a practitioner is supposed to use to transfer the blood and qi from an assistant into the elixir field inside his body. The word *tuoyue* means bellows, which are used to blow up fires in a furnace. It appears in the fifth chapter of the *Laozi*, where it serves as a symbol of the relationship between Heaven and Earth. In internal alchemy, it usually refers to breath (often embryonic breath) that spurs the ebb and flow of yin and yang during the practice.

In the *Jindan zhenchuan* and related self-cultivation traditions, it seems to serve a completely different purpose, acting as an instrument that connects practitioners with their assistants, enabling the former to replenish their blood and qi without any physical contact. This instrument is mentioned in several medical texts from the Ming and Qing dynasties. One such text is *Shoushi baoyuan* 壽世保

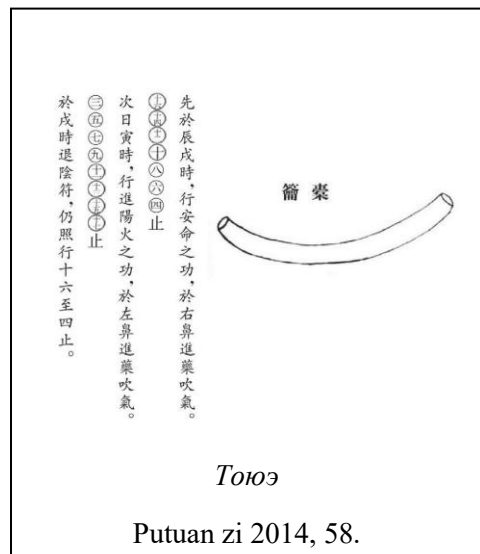
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<sup>23</sup> 若謂：“神交體不交，氣交形不交”。請問入室之時，若不動心，陽物可能硬乎？若問男不寬衣，女不解帶，請問過氣之時，女子不脫褲，橐籥從何處送進陰戶？男子不脫褲，陽物從何處插入橐籥？(Chen and Zhang 2010, 279).

<sup>24</sup> 若問築基下手，須明橐籥玄關。追他氣血過丹田，正是填離取坎。(ZWDS 11: 862.1b).

元 (*Preserving the Source of Prolonging Life*), written by the famous Ming physician Gong Tingxian 龔廷賢 (1522–1619).<sup>25</sup>

According to the *Shoushi baoyuan* and similar medical texts, “tuoyue” refers to metal instruments of varying shapes and sizes. These devices connect patients with assistants, with shapes tailored to specific body parts, such as the mouth or genitals. Equipped with openings on both sides, assistants exhale through their side, transmitting vital power to patients on the opposite side.<sup>26</sup>



The *Jindan zhenchuan* does not explicitly define “tuoyue” in the same way, but its use for extracting assistants’ blood and qi suggests this interpretation is likely. Many practitioners across different eras shared this understanding. For instance, Zhang Yishang, active in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that Gong Tingxian was a disciple of Master An, the teacher of Sun Jiaoluan. Thus, Gong and Sun may belong to the same self-cultivation tradition and practice the same method (Zhang 2012, 8).

Wang Dongting’s critical references to this practice also suggest that the conception of *tuoyue* as a physical tool was prevalent during the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

If asked, “Is a *tuoyue* made of gold and silver?” The *Daode jing* says, “Between heaven and earth, is it not like a *tuoyue*?” How should the word “like” be interpreted?<sup>27</sup>

In the view of Wang, followers of Sun Jiaoluan perceive *tuoyue* as an instrument crafted from gold and silver, a conception he believes contradicts the term’s usage in Laozi’s teachings.

Further support for the plausibility of this interpretation is found in the work of Qiu Zhao’ao, a figure associated with the Sun Jiaoluan school, who authored the earliest known description of this practice. In his writings, he states:

The zither and the sword are the tools of the alchemical method, represented by the trigrams Dui and Gen. When the “other” exhales, “me” inhales, allowing the qi to intermingle, yet the forms remain distinct; when the qi arrives, and the pass is opened, the qi flows freely through the hundred meridians, dispelling issues related to wind, cold, dampness, and lingering illnesses.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Gong Tingxian 龔廷賢 (1522–1619) was a renowned physician, author of several medical texts, and a popularizer of medical knowledge during the late Ming period. See e.g., Aricanli 2022, 302–322. On the *tuoyue* in the *Shoushi baoyuan*, see, Putuan zi, 2014, 45–71.

<sup>26</sup> Putuan zi 2014, 45–71.

<sup>27</sup> 如問囊籥是金銀打造。道德經曰，天地之間，其猶囊籥乎？請問猶字如何解？Chen and Zhang 2010, 320).

<sup>28</sup> 琴劍者，丹方之器皿，兑艮兩像是也。彼呵我吸，氣交而形不交，氣至關開，則百脈流通，風寒暑濕，宿疾頓除。(Zhiji zi 2011 475).

Qiu Zhao'ao does not explicitly mention *tuoyue* in this passage. However, his description of the method – where an assistant exhales and the practitioner inhales, likely without physical contact – closely aligns with the documented use of this instrument in related medical treatises.

In summary, while the *Jindan zhenchuan* does not explicitly confirm “tuoyue” as a physical tool, the weight of evidence suggests this interpretation was the most plausible and widely accepted among alchemists over time. Descriptions in the *Jindan zhenchuan*, medical texts, Qiu Zhao'ao writings, and late-Qing alchemical accounts all indicate that “tuoyue” functioned as an instrument facilitating the connection between practitioners and assistants during “sex at a distance.”

It is also crucial to note that no physical transfer of substances, such as blood, occurs. Instead, the practitioner draws on external support to replenish the creative yin-yang power that blood and qi represent. From a distance, practitioners absorb the invisible forces of yin and yang from an external source, but most importantly, they must replicate the true yin-yang interaction – a process achievable only through the collective effort of the entire alchemical community.

### Community

One fundamental aspect of the practice is the importance of communal help. The text explains this concept as follows:

If you inquire about acquiring the medicine, gather the lead and suppress the yin essence. Yellow Dame and companions must be of one mind; only then can the furnace be set up and the cauldron be established.<sup>29</sup>

The text further clarifies the meaning of these terms,

Yellow Dame denotes the external Yellow Dame; Companions refer to the three like-minded individuals; the furnace symbolizes the other; the cauldron stands for me.<sup>30</sup>

This community that supports a practitioner consists of three key elements: fellow companions with deep knowledge of the method, assistants (referred to as “furnace”), and a “yellow dame.”

The Yellow Dame is likely a female assistant who facilitates communication with other female assistants. Assistants, referred to as the “furnace,” provide the practitioner with blood and qi. The *Jindan zhenchuan* describes the practice as follows,

Qi is the former-heaven qi generated within the latter-heaven cauldron. Replenishing involves the zither and the sword, and it requires an understanding of how to align it with the timing of the tally and fire. Blood naturally descends from either the former-heaven cauldron or the latter-heaven cauldron. Replenishing also involves the zither and the sword, and it is necessary to distinguish between the lines of hexagrams and the weight fractions of the old and fresh.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> 若問如何得藥，采鉛制伏陰精。黃婆侶伴要同心，纔去安爐立鼎。(ZWDS 11: 863.2a).

<sup>30</sup> 黃婆者，外黃婆也；侶伴者，同志三人也；爐者，彼也；鼎者，我也。(ZWDS 11: 863.2a).

<sup>31</sup> 氣者，後天鼎中所生先天之氣也。補之有琴劍焉，須明日時符火可也。血者，或先天鼎中，或後天鼎中所自降也。補之亦有琴劍焉，須辨老嫩爻可也。(ZYDS 11, 863.1b).

The identity of the assistants remains ambiguous. A sexual interpretation suggests they are female, but the practice may involve both male and female. Practitioners require both blood and qi – yin and yang elements – implying the need for both genders. The text associates replenishing these energies with a zither and a sword, symbols of yin and yang that can carry sexual connotations, including references to genitalia. However, in this context, they likely represent assistants, with female assistants providing blood and male assistants supplying qi.

Qiu Zhao'ao implies that the practice involves both females and males. He writes:

Twenty rounds of exhalation occur, with four Dui ☱ in the lead (each holding twenty coins, depositing one coin into the basin with each breath). The five rounds halve (only halving to match the cycle count). One Gen ☶ cauldron follows (Gen [exhales] only once, so there is no need to reduce it).<sup>32</sup>

Qiu describes a breathing practice with *tuoyue*, starting with four Dui and one Gen. In his symbolism, Dui represents the zither and Gen the sword, suggesting the practitioner is aided by four female and one male assistant. This approach parallels the *tuoyue* technique in medical texts, which also involves both male and female assistants (Putuan zi 2014).

The “alchemical method of dragon and tiger” (*longhu danfa* 龍虎丹法) also involves both female and male participants. Featured in Zhang Yishang's writings, it was later endorsed by Hu Fuchen, a modern scholar of internal alchemy (Hu 2009a, 271–275). According to Zhang and Hu, the *Jindan zhenchuan* describes this practice (Hu 2009b, 12–13).

The details of this practice remain unclear, likely due to its ethical and legal controversy. However, its general outline can be inferred from various sources, both supportive and critical. Also known as “the meeting of the three houses” (*sanjia xiangjian* 三家相見), the “houses” refer to the practitioner and the “dragon” and “tiger” – the male and female assistants, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Some proponents of this method argue that the sword corresponds to a male assistant and the zither to a female.

Moreover, these assistants appear to be children; one description identifies the “dragon” as an eight-year-old boy and the “tiger” as a seven-year-old girl. No physical contact occurs between the practitioner and assistants. The practitioner remains in a separate space designed for this purpose, while the assistants aid from a distance using *tuoyue* (Xie 2007, 41–43).

No alchemical text records this method. Zhang and Hu assert it was a secret esoteric practice, never documented and only recently disclosed (Zhang 2012, 33). No evidence links it to the *Jindan zhenchuan* method, particularly regarding the use of child assistants. However, this interpretation suggests both male and female assistants played a role in Sun Jiaoluan's teachings.

Other interpretations suggest the assistants could be female, a view shared by some supporters and critics of the *Jindan zhenchuan* method. The text never explicitly identifies the zither and sword as

<sup>32</sup> 呵以二十，四兌居首（各持二十錢，每一進投一錢於盆）。五輪縮半（惟縮故合周數）。一艮鼎後（艮只一回，不必裁減）。（*Zhiji zi* 2011, 475）.

<sup>33</sup> The master of internal alchemy Putuan zi extensively describes this practice and heavily criticize it in Putuan zi, 2014. See also Putuan zi 2007a, 38–41; 2007b, 42–44.

human assistants; they may instead represent two types of *tuoyue* – one for transferring qi and the other for blood.

Additionally, blood and qi may come solely from females, potentially eliminating the need for male assistants. Breastfeeding, for example, generates both in a child's body. The text suggests these are not separate entities but can share a single origin and transform into each other, possibly justifying an all-female practice.

Further supporting this interpretation, Wang Dongting criticizes the method as a “beauty trap” for wealthy elites fearing death, explicitly stating it involves females (Chen and Zhang 2010, 279). Given his strong condemnation of this method, he would likely have mentioned male or child assistants if they were involved.

The treatise's portrayal of assistants is ambiguous, allowing for varied interpretations. This suggests that gender is not the primary concern – what matters is that blood and qi come from an external source, regardless of whether the assistants are male or female.

The third and most crucial element of the community is the companions. Unlike assistants, who play a passive role, companions – always men – actively oversee and orchestrate the replenishment of the practitioner's qi and blood, a process I interpret as the formation of the communal body. The success of the practice depends entirely on their actions, a role emphasized both in the scripture's creation and in the lives of its adherents.

Master An transmitted alchemical knowledge to Sun Jiaoluan in exchange for Sun serving as his companion, assisting in his cultivation. Similarly, Sun, unable to practice for years due to a lack of companions, passed his teachings to his son in return for his son's role in his practice.

Companions are essential because replenishing blood and qi alone is insufficient; practitioners must also regulate the circulation of yin and yang. Companions ensure these elements are sourced externally, mirroring the roles of parents in human birth and the fundamental immortal forces shaping life.

### **Ritualization and Ritual**

The *Jindan zhenchuan* aims to replicate the interaction of the two divine qi that govern human life in the immortal realm, which manifest as maternal blood and paternal qi in the mortal world. After puberty, practitioners lose their original blood and qi, making it impossible to sustain this yin-yang interaction on their own. To restore it, they must replenish these forces externally. However, no physical transfer occurs between assistants and practitioners. What is needed is not the physical substances themselves, but the dynamic interplay of the divine forces they represent.

Companions replicate this interplay – the rhythmic ebb and flow of yin and yang – by channeling assistants' blood and qi to recreate circulation in an embryonic state, granting access to divine creative power. This process forms a communal body rather than a conventional physical one.

The text describes it as follows:

Thus it is said that returning the elixir is easy; refining oneself is the most difficult – one must not fail to be cautious. It is necessary, while remaining in a state of desires, to eliminate them, and while being in the midst of worldly bustle, to transcend it. Cleanse the altar, arrange the zither and sword, observe the lead flower to determine the timing of the fire, rely on the Yellow Dame

to stabilize the rising and sinking, use companions to measure the passage of time, and follow the hours of Zi (11pm–1am) and Wu (11am–1pm) to prepare for extracting and replenishing.<sup>34</sup>

Use the Flying Numinous Sword to extract lead from the tiger’s tail, and the Heaven-Piercing Sword to advance the fire on the dragon’s head. Follow the norms and standards to pursue the Hun soul and subdue the Po soul. Rely on the craftsman’s skill to disperse the mist and clouds, allowing the spirit to infuse the qi, the qi to infuse the form, and let it thoroughly permeate and steam through all the bones.<sup>35</sup>

This passage explores returning the elixir, an advanced phase of alchemical cultivation, emphasizing that practitioners rely on external support at all stages, not just during the initial replenishment of blood and qi.

According to the passage, companions connect assistants to the practitioner, possibly using a *tuoyue*, and guide them in actions like breathing into it in sync with yin-yang patterns. This likely involves adjusting the *tuoyue* type and breath count to maintain proper timing and rhythm. Companions also monitor the practitioner’s physical responses to ensure correct progress.

The patterns according to which assistants act are crucial, and the entire practice can be seen as a form of ritualized activity. Consequently, this communal body, formed with the help of assistants, can be viewed as a ritualized “body.”

This ritualized activity gradually evolves into a fully developed ritual. The text describes this ritual as follows:

On the night of the first full moon of the eighth lunar month, at the moment when the yang begins to stir, the host ascends the altar, performing the pace of Yu.<sup>36</sup> With the left hand holding the dragon and the right hand grasping the tiger, [they] meticulously adjust the phases of qi, calibrate it according to the star cycles, align yin and yang, and regulate them with the water clock. Thus, the union of metal and water is achieved, and the dragon wood became pregnant with magnificence.<sup>37</sup>

The text references a ritual with elements like an altar and the steps of Yu but offers few specifics. Its main focus is the practice’s evolution – from basic blood and qi replenishment to ritualized yin-yang circulation, culminating in a fully developed ritual. This process purifies both physical blood and qi, refining the collective “body” and preparing practitioners for entry into the divine realm. Rather than sexual alchemy, it functions as a communal purification ritual.

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<sup>34</sup> The Zi hour symbolizes the beginning of the time cycle’s first half, when yang begins to rise, while the Wu hour represents the second half, when yin starts to accumulate.

<sup>35</sup> 故曰還丹容易，煉己最難，不可不慎也。其必在欲絕欲，居塵出塵。潔淨壇墀，安排琴劍，看鉛花而行火候，托黃婆而定浮沉，憑伴侶而分刻漏，照子午而備抽添。用飛靈劍採鉛於虎尾之中，用通天劍進火於龍頭之上。依法度追魂制魄，憑匠手提霧拿雲，使神沖氣，氣沖形，熏蒸百骸。(ZWDS 11: 865.2b–866.1a).

<sup>36</sup> The pace of Yu (*yubu* 禹步) is a style of circling an altar in Daoist rituals, which is said to imitate the limp of the legendary Emperor Yu. See Andersen 2008, 237–240.

<sup>37</sup> 當八月首望之宵，一陽初動之際，當先主者，禹步登壇，左手擒龍，右手擒虎，精調氣候，數按周星，匹配陰陽，息符刻漏，故得金水交並，龍木孕英矣。(ZWDS 11: 867.2a).

### Internal Spiritual Cultivation

In *The Elephant and the Blind*, German philosopher Thomas Metzinger explores how the human mind can dissolve bodily boundaries and shift its sense of identification from one's own physical body to external entities – such as space, community, or even the very act of knowing (Metzinger 2024, 281–295). This concept resembles the practice described in the *Jindan zhenchuan*, where practitioners come to perceive the communal body created by companions and assistants as their own.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* presents alchemical practice from two distinct perspectives: that of the community of helpers and that of the practitioners themselves. From the community's perspective, practitioners are absent as active agents and are merely objects of the communal practice.

From the practitioner's perspective, the external world disappears, and no direct interaction occurs, making it nearly impossible to characterize the text as describing sexual alchemy. Practitioners focus entirely on their perceptions and sensations, employing deep meditative techniques similar to conventional alchemy to generate the elixir through subjective bodily experience. They do not interact directly with the community of helpers who replenish their blood and qi; instead, they perceive the flow of blood and qi from outside as their own body. Therefore, referring to the replenishment of blood and qi with external aid as the formation of a communal body, and breaking ordinary boundaries of the physical body, becomes a central aspect of the practice.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* depicts practitioners as being so deeply absorbed in their internal practice that they lose awareness of the external world. As a result, when they receive external medicine, they enter a state of vagueness, similar to intoxication. The text elaborates:

Genuine medicine comes from outside; it inherently belongs to the former-heaven essence. It is a single dot of primordial qi, pure and undisturbed. Yet with my latter-heaven disposition, I gather and receive this former-heaven medicine, employing yin to drive yang and yin to contend with yang. When yin desires to retreat and depart, it still remains bound by the physical form and cannot yet shed its harness; when yang desires to take charge, it is still immature and unable to settle immediately.

Hence, that which desires to vanish cannot vanish immediately; that which desires to grow cannot grow immediately. Through motion and lingering, through greed and attachment, from head to toe, one becomes thoroughly drunk, as if in a stupor. (Headnote: In darkness and vagueness, one often drinks the wine of the immortals. Also stated: Within the gourd, the wine of longevity is continuously added)<sup>38</sup> Without the support of companions and a yellow dame, how could one carry out the tally and move the fire?<sup>39</sup>

Upon receiving external medicine, practitioners enter a liminal state between yin and yang, where the mortal aspect (yin) resists fading, and the immortal aspect (yang) struggles to emerge, creating an

<sup>38</sup> This is a commentary by Fu Jinqian.

<sup>39</sup> 惟外來真藥，本屬先天之精，一點元氣，渾然純全，未經擾動，而我以後天之質，聚受此先天之藥，陰為陽驅，陰為陽鬪。陰欲退舍，尚為形包而未能脫駕，陽欲為主，然猶稚嫩而未能即安。故欲消者，不能即消；欲長者，不能即長。以遷以延，以貪以戀，渾身上下，入醉如癡。（頂批：杳冥恍惚，常飲仙家酒。又曰：壺內旋添延命酒）。不有侶伴，黃婆扶持，何以行符運火。（ZWDS 11: 864.1b）



intoxicated sensation akin to the wine of immortals. At this stage, they must focus entirely on internal refinement, diminishing yin and strengthening yang. Using traditional alchemical methods, they guide the medicine through the Lesser Celestial Circuit (xiao zhoutian 小周天), where it ascends along the back, descends along the front, and forms an elixir in the lower elixir field.

Most crucially, the alchemist enters a state of profound meditation, shutting off the gates of their senses to the external world. The text provides further details:

If you seek to know how to coalesce the elixir, keep your spirit sealed within the six tightly closed gates, while ensuring the genuine master resides in the Yellow Court, all the while guarding the primordial yang during dream-filled sleep. Wood's nature matches metal emotion; the water ascends, and fire descends, resting and pausing. To gracefully reside in the world while preserving the genuine form, one must wait until the yin tally retreats completely.<sup>40</sup>

At no stage do adepts engage in sexual activity. Immersed in internal practice, they lose awareness of the external world and rely entirely on their companions, whose support is essential.

From the practitioners' perspective, their practice mirrors standard alchemical cultivation. One might even argue they do not receive medicine externally but instead cultivate within a communal body rather than an individual physical one. Though companions and assistants form this body externally, practitioners experience it as their own, perceiving the creation of medicine within their consciousness. By using this medicine, they form a sacred embryo, guide it to the upper elixir field, and ultimately transcend the body, integrating into the immortal realm.

## Conclusion

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many alchemists sought to adapt internal alchemy to modern society. Their reinterpretation, which continues to influence contemporary understanding, framed internal alchemy as an individual psychophysiological practice – scientific and experimental, rather than in opposition to modern science. As part of this shift, the concept of sexual alchemy emerged, interpreting sexual metaphors in alchemical texts literally. However, the concept of sexual alchemy rests on a tenuous foundation, as few texts clearly describe or explicitly support its existence.

This paper discusses a single text – the *Jindan zhenchuan* – and therefore cannot offer ultimate or universal conclusions about the tradition of sexual alchemy as a whole. A much broader and deeper investigation would be necessary to achieve that. Nevertheless, this text is particularly important, as it is one of the few alchemical works that explicitly discusses the use of external assistance in alchemical practice and is frequently cited as a primary example of sexual alchemy. While it does not allow us to reach definitive conclusions about the nature of sexual alchemy, it challenges several fundamental assumptions associated with the concept and draws attention to overlooked aspects of internal alchemy.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* challenges the notion that sexual alchemy and internal alchemy are inherently esoteric practices. Whether considered a “sexual treasure” or not, the text appears designed

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<sup>40</sup> 若問如何丹結，六門緊閉存神。卻教真主坐黃庭，夢寐元陽謹慎。木性金情配合，水升火降休停。翩然住世保真形，必待陰符退盡。(ZWDS 11: 864.2a)

to be accessible, encouraging outsiders to reconnect with self-cultivation and the divine. The perceived esotericism of sexual alchemy in such texts is comparable to the accessibility of modern New Age literature – widely published and available to a broad audience.

The *Jindan zhenchuan* illustrates why defining a text as sexual based solely on metaphors is problematic. Yin-yang symbolism and explicit sexual imagery do not necessarily indicate sexual practices, nor do references to external involvement always imply sexual interaction. Practitioners seek to reconnect with Former-Heaven forces, which manifest in substances like a mother's blood and a father's qi. By emulating and gradually purifying these substances, they restore their original essence, a process some alchemists describe as “borrowing the false to cultivate the genuine” (jiejia xiu zhen 借假修真).

While this may suggest sexual practices, it does not necessarily entail them. As the *Jindan zhenchuan* demonstrates, external help can also refer to communal practices. By using the community as a substitute for parental forces, practitioners navigate a liminal space between the divine and the mundane, thereby “borrowing the false” to “cultivate the ultimate,” purifying ordinary substances and transcending mundane existence.

The emphasis on community in the *Jindan zhenchuan* shows that internal alchemy is more complex than the commonly perceived individual meditation practice. It may involve collective efforts with companions, women, and even children, without necessarily implying sexual practices.

The text also challenges contemporary assumptions about the alchemical body, which is often equated with the physical body in modern alchemical practice, focusing on material and “scientific” aspects. However, *Jindan zhenchuan* suggests that the alchemical body may be entirely distinct from the physical body. Practitioners transcend physical boundaries, forming a communal body from the blood and qi of assistants, which they perceive as their own. This raises the question: do other internal alchemy systems also conceptualize the body differently from conventional understanding?

Finally, the text underscores that internal alchemy may be a genuine religious and ritualistic practice, rather than merely a quasi-scientific exercise. The practice described in *Jindan zhenchuan* aims for unification with the divine on Mount Kunlun, with the final stages of cultivation occurring in the immortal realm through divine self-cultivation.

In conclusion, while internal alchemy involves individual meditation and some practitioners may have used sexual techniques, interpreting it solely as an individual practice or equating all alternative methods with sexual techniques reflects modern biases. This view overlooks the tradition's complexity, which involved the reinterpretation of alchemical scriptures, a unique understanding of the body, and the use of ordinary substances for transcendence. It also encompassed rituals, community involvement, and divine assistance.

### 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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