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Fabrizio Pregadio intends with this survey to illustrate the foundations of the Daoist Great Clarity (Taiqing 太清) tradition, “the earliest known Chinese alchemical legacy”, and the background it shares with other traditions of the early medieval period (roughly from the third to the sixth centuries CE). This is done in order to give due attention to the doctrinal and religious aspects of Chinese alchemy.

The work is in five parts (with 12 chapters): Part One, ‘The heaven of Great Clarity and its revelations’ (pp. 23-66), introduces the thin layer of early Han allusions to alchemical subjects, but moves swiftly on to the Taiqing tradition, as the latter has left the earliest historical traces extant. The Taiqing tradition was “centered on a set of key scriptures and practices, and developed through the addition of subsidiary texts and methods” (p. 52). The extant Taiqing corpus is formed of fourteen texts that are concisely described in chapter 3, and the appendixes B and C. The description highlights the composite nature of this textual material, and gives indications for dating estimations.

In sum, the corpus contains methods for about a dozen elixirs, and in Part Two, ‘The elixirs of the Great Clarity’ (pp. 67-120), it becomes possible “to reconstruct the main doctrinal, ritual, and technical aspects of the Taiqing legacy” (p. 63).

The symbolism of red (cinnabar) is a pervading subject. Pregadio maintains that the word dān 丹—that has the double meaning of ‘cinnabar’ and ‘elixir’—“evolves from a root-meaning of ‘essence’” (p. 69), but this attempt at etymology merits reconsideration.

The ritual sequence starts with a ceremony of transmission that includes the combined knowledge of oral and written instructions. The adept retires
with two or three attendants to an isolated place, on a mountain, near an eastward-flowing river. Purification rites and talismans to protect the ritual space are detailed. A new laboratory is built according to specifications concerning its dimensions, orientation in space, etc.

The adept tries “to re-create the primordial inchoate state within the crucible” (p. 77), which has to be sealed and luted completely, leaving no crack or opening. The Taiqing tradition knows about a dozen ‘elixirs’ (dān 丹) or ‘medicines’ (yào 藥). The Taiqing ‘reverted elixir’ (huán dān 還丹) is an elixir obtained by causing its ingredients to revert to their original condition of ‘essence’ (jīng 精) (pp. 100f).

The author surveys the techniques to make, fill, lute, heat and finally open the crucible again, and presents in great detail the main features of the Taiqing elixirs, such as the Elixir of Great Clarity, the Nine Elixirs, the Golden Liquor, the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles, and the Flower of Langgan (pp. 108-120).

In Part Three, ‘A history of the Great Clarity’ (pp. 121-158), the author first discusses Ge Hong’s “Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature” (Baopu zi neipian 抱樸子內篇), which give an illustration of the relationship of alchemy to the “fourth-century legacies of Jiangnan” and are compared with the Taiqing sources. Ge Hong had not himself performed any alchemical procedures at the time of writing, but rather included diverse fragments of doctrine and practice into his compilation, some of which would otherwise be lost. Moreover, his work draws distinctions between different trends of doctrine and practices, deeming “meditation and the compounding and ingestion of elixirs to be superior to self-cultivation methods like dao yin (gymnastics), breathing, sexual techniques, and various types of diets (…)” (p. 125). Ge Hong asks: “Can the Dao really be nothing more than the pursuit of nourishing life?” (p. 135, Baopu zi 10.18 4). Ingesting the Taiqing elixirs confers immortality, other methods grant only longevity, “coarse and rustic practitioners” are criticised for failing to obtain the “great methods of the Golden Elixir”. Moreover, the ingestion of elixirs, the mere possession of them, or rubbing them on a person’s eyes, on house doors or city walls, grants all the lesser benefits that could be derived from the possession of scriptures that function as talismans or such “minor arts” as summoning the gods, controlling demons, averting evil, etc. On the other hand, ingestion of herbal drugs is “inadequate to circumvent the harms caused by demons and spirits” (p. 130). Instead alchemical medicines integrate and—with typical hyperbole—are said to surpass as well the healing properties of herbal cures, and may even restore life after death! Elixirs derive their superiority over herbs from the alchemical process that brings, by repeated transmutations, matter back to its original state of “essence”. Ge Hong
distinguishes two meditation methods, ‘guarding the Real One’—the
visualisation and meditation on inner deities, and ‘guarding the Mysterious One’, the manipulation of one’s body image by dividing oneself into
three and more persons to achieve ubiquity or invisibility.

The author then proceeds to describe the renewed context of alchemy
(wài dān 外丹) in the Daoist religion of the Six Dynasties. First, the
encounter between the Taiqing and Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity)
traditions in the second half of the fourth century CE—the latter not only
relegates alchemy to second place after the Shangqing meditation methods,
it also interiorizes alchemical terminology and imagery in order to describe
“celestial or inner pneumas” that the adept “ingests”. “In these and other
ways, Shangqing effectively bends the nature and purposes of waidan to its
own ends, anticipating in this way traits that later characterize inner
alchemy, of which this tradition is one of the main forerunners” (p. 143).

Then follows the attribution of alchemical knowledge to Zhang Daoling
張道陵—the beginner of the Tiānshī dào 天師道, or Way of the Celestial
Masters—that documents its prestige outside of the alchemical tradition, as
well as “a pledge of loyalty made by the Jiangnan aristocratic families to
the Celestial Masters” (p. 149) in order to adapt to the newly imported
religion (pace Michel Strickmann), or (following Isabelle Robinet) to give
credence to their own Shangqing beliefs, and to relegate the figure of
Zhang Daoling to a low rank among other saints of the past.

And, finally he turns to the formation of the Taiqing ‘Four Supplements’
(sì fǔ 四輔) to the Daoist Canon of around 500 CE, including also
nourishing life texts, “which thus continued to be associated with the
heaven of Great Clarity” (p. 152). The ranking and teaching of the older
texts was thereby achieved by re-arrangement and supplements that lead
to a permanent inclusion into the Canon, but the decline and final
disappearance of the Taiqing tradition as well as textual losses left space
for the inclusion of unrelated writings, now found in the Daoist Canon of
1445.

Part Four, ‘Texts of the Great Clarity’ (pp. 159-200), consists of partial
translations of three texts, namely (ch. 9) the first chapter of the Huangdì jiuding shendan jingjue 黃帝九鼎神丹經訣 (Instructions on the Scripture of
the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor; CT 8851), (ch.
10) the first chapter of Baopu zi shenxian jinzhuo jing 抱朴子神仙金汋經
(Scripture of the Golden Liquid of the Divine Immortals, by the Master
Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature; CT 917), and (ch. 11) pp. 1a-5b of the

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1 The abbreviation CT precedes the catalogue number in Kristofer Schipper,
Concordance du Tao-tsang: Titres des ouvrages, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-
Orient, 1975.
Taiji zhenren jiu zhu ji huandan jing yao jue 太極真人九轉還丹經要訣 (Essential Instructions on the Scripture of the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles of the Perfected of the Great Ultimate; CT 889). The translations contain interlinear comments in smaller type by the author.  

Part Five, ‘The legacy of the Great Clarity’ (ch. 12, pp. 203-223), outlines the main changes in the history of Chinese alchemy that resulted both in the disappearance of the Taiqing tradition, and in the rise of physiological or inner alchemy (nèi dān 内丹).

The earliest hints of alchemical imagery in relation to meditative techniques date to the second century CE, and are found in the two epigraphic texts “Inscriptions for Laozi” (Laozi ming 老子銘) and “Stele to Wangzi Qiao” (Wangzi Qiao bei 王子喬碑), mentioning the Cinnabar Hut, the Yellow Court, the Cinnabar Field, and the Purple Chamber. Even the ‘embryo’ (tāi 胎) is already mentioned in the late second century CE Xiang'er commentary to the Laozi.

By the third century there existed a “common codified terminology” that linked the description of locations inside the body—the experiential room of the adept—with the names for materials and reactions inside the crucible—where the likewise hidden reactions take place. Some of them appear already in Ge Hong’s “Inner Chapters”, while more detailed views are found in the “Central Scripture of Laozi” (Laozi zhongjing 老子中經) and the “Scripture of the Yellow Court” (Huangting jing 黃庭經). In providing superior nourishment to the adept and his inner gods, the salivary juices perform a function analogous to the one that the elixirs, or their ingredients, do in waidan. The analogies of essences, pneumas, and salivary juices with waidan end where those with neidan begin: the adept nourishes himself and his gods not through the ingestion of external substances, but through components of his own inner body; he finds the vital ingredients within himself, and their ingestion takes place internally” (pp. 208-209).

The Red Child, or the embryo in the male womb, is in the Central Scripture of Laozi also the innermost deity in a man’s body, and alchemical imagery is associated with the child’s nourishment. Later, some neidan texts develop practices to nourish and raising the embryo, but others refer to embryo and elixir alike as images of one’s authentic self, and of one’s own awakened state. The Shangqing meditation text “Authentic Scripture of the Great Cavern” (Dadong zhenjing 大洞真經) ends with the adept generating an inner ‘divine being’ “by coagulating and ingesting pneumas that descend from the Muddy Pellet (niwan), the upper Cinnabar Field in the region of

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the brain” (p. 211). Other Shangqing texts relate the Nine Elixirs to the pneumas of the Nine Heavens, which are received by humans during their embryonic development. Further Shangqing practices are based on images of the Sun and Moon, which are now not essences and pneumas found within one’s own body. Rather, the adept has to collect Sun and Moon essences in a vessel containing water and a talisman.

The text to have the greatest impact in terms of historical changes within the alchemical tradition was the work “Token for the Agreement of the Three According to the Book of Changes” (Zhouyi cantong qi 周易参同契). It explains the alchemical process by borrowing the language and emblems of the Book of Changes (Yijing 易經), and of the system of correlative cosmology. “These emblems make it possible to describe and relate to each other different cosmological configurations represented by Yin and Yang, the Five Agents, the trigrams and hexagrams of the Book of Changes, the Celestial Stems and the Earthly Branches, the twenty-eight lunar mansions, and so forth, in ways unknown to the earlier tradition represented by the Taiqing and other waidan texts” (p. 216). The earlier meditation texts shared their imagery and technical vocabulary, which likewise underwent many changes in the later texts. But “the inner gods of the Daoist mediation practices serve no more”. Instead, the adept of the Token for the Agreement of the Three now “surveys” (can), examines (cha), investigates (kao), explores (tan), inquires (ji), and inspects (shen); he gauges (can) and measures (du); he reflects (si), ponders (li), infers (tui), and assesses (kui). This is not a mere intellectual activity, but takes place, instead, through “contemplation” (guan) (pp. 219-220).

By the middle of the Tang period, the methods using many different kinds of minerals fell out of use, and those based on refining mercury from cinnabar and using lead had grown in importance. The abundant use of yinyang and Yijing language leads to a binary and abstract way of argumentation in favour not only of the paired use of lead and mercury, but also to a description of the alchemical process entirely within the (male) human body. “The development of neidan in the form it took from the Tang period onward would not have been possible without the earlier traditions of Daoist meditation, and occurred in parallel with two shifts, related to each other, in waidan—from a ritual framework to a cosmological framework, and from methods based on cinnabar or other [mainly mineral] ingredients to methods based on lead and mercury” (p. 223).

Conspicuous by their absence in Pregadio’s treatment are the sexual techniques that share with alchemy, however, the metaphors of intake—by the absorption of ‘female essence’ (nǚ jīng 女精) or the ingestion of the elixir’s “essence”, with which the male adepts likewise thought to improve their health and overall wellness in a prospected long life. Moreover, both
the sexual techniques and the alchemical procedures became interiorized processes in the texts of later religious communities.\(^3\) Also absent is any notion of the gendered character of the described techniques, which seem to address male adepts.

The work ends with the following appendices: A: ‘Dates of texts in the Waidan corpus’ (pp. 227-229); B: ‘Additional notes on Great Clarity and related texts’ (pp. 231-240); C: ‘Additional notes on the commentary to the Scripture of the Nine Elixirs’ (pp. 241-254). These are followed by ‘Notes’ (pp. 255-298), the ‘Glossary of Chinese and Japanese terms with characters’ (pp. 299-318), the ‘Bibliography of Works quoted’ (pp. 319-336), and the ‘Index’ (pp. 337-367).

The book is beautifully set, adding value to its very informative, precise, marvellously detailed, and well-researched intellectual content.

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