

A Brief Introduction to the Southern Taoist Alchemy Tradition of Jindan (Golden Cinnabar)

TaoistStudies.Org represents the Taoist Alchemy Tradition of the Yinyang School of the Golden Cinnabar, a 1,000-year-old alchemical tradition from the Jiangnan region of Southeast China. Our knowledge comes from Taoist alchemy masters of this tradition and from our own practical experience and scientific research. Our predecessors instructed us to promote Taoist disciplines, such as Taoist inspired Internal Martial Arts and Fine Arts. Our institute possesses an extensive Chinese library with thousands of works. Relevant Western books are also in our collection. Prof. dr. Dan K.J. Vercaemmen is a direct disciple of Dr. Fu Qinglong 傅青龍.

Text from *Jindan, the Golden Cinnabar, Taoist Internal Alchemy, vol. 1* by Dan K.J. Vercaemmen (丹凝子)

The origins of Chinese Internal Alchemy (*Neidan* 內丹) are unknown. It is clear from historical evidence that it already existed two thousand five hundred years ago and probably well beyond that age, but we are uncertain about its actual form and the sources. It may have come from abroad and yet it may also have been indigenous and spread towards other civilizations. During its long history it was certainly influenced by other cultures, not in the least by Buddhism, yet it obviously also had a strong appeal to other regions and cultures, since many circles inside and outside of China felt attracted to it. The very fact that you are reading this should make it clear to you that this ancient culture is still as attractive to people as it was two thousand years ago.

It is generally accepted that what we call 'alchemy' in China has to do with metallurgy and the so-called '*xian*' (仙) culture. The ancient Chinese used to call that part of metallurgy that was concerned with the making of gold and silver the 'technique of yellow and white' (*huangbaishu* 黃白術) because of the colour of the products (yellow gold and white silver). The '*xian*', usually interpreted as 'immortals' in Western literature, were concerned with the prolongation of life and used all sorts of means to reach this ultimate goal. One of the means was making 'immortality medicine' (*changshengyao* 長生藥), and for this herbs and minerals were used. These '*xian*' adepts must therefore have studied metallurgy or they may have discovered metallurgy through their practices and experiments with minerals and herbs. Early metal objects were mainly used in rituals and refer to religious circles.

Some of the famous ancient Chinese bronzes actually show *xian* themes. The early writers on the subject who were also *xian* admirers (such as Zhuangzi and Laozi), mention the kind of practices associated with these people and the results and stages of these practices. They do not mention metallurgy, however. Clear evidence of the connection between metallurgy alchemy and *xian* culture can be found in later writings, such as the *Baopuzi Neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the Master-Who-Embraces-Simplicity). In this work, Ge Hong writes about *jindan* 金丹 (gold and cinnabar or golden cinnabar) and we can find recipes and methods to make gold and the immortality medicines. Another famous writing containing valuable source material is the *Zhouyi Cantongqi* 周易參同契 (Identifying the Three as One Following the book of Changes), a Taoist writing on alchemy and cosmology. This and other writings make it obvious that the purpose of the alchemy was not just making gold (and silver) but the elevation of the alchemist towards heavenly status, which exactly was what the *xian* were after. The *Book of Changes* was introduced not as a book on divination but as one on the internal changes of the alchemist's body and its symbols became illustrations of the stages of these changes. With the further development of the

internal practice came the idea of not needing external elements to reach this goal and the gradual descent of the experimental or external aspects of the art became a fact. Some think they were aborted because of the disastrous results of taking in the lethal ingredients of the immortality potions (lead and quicksilver not being very harmless), some think it may have had other causes, but the *Waidan*/External Cinnabar or Alchemy (外丹) aspects definitely gave way to the *neidan* (內丹) practices from the Tang onwards. In fact, both aspects were never completely separated. The author's fieldwork in present-day China reveals that so-called *waidan* recipes and all kinds of techniques (nowadays called qigong and involving self-massage, breathing exercises, diets, etc.) are still being used as inferior means to make the body function well, whereas the actual internal work is seen as the superior practice. When the internal work gained authority, the word *Neidan* (Internal Cinnabar/Alchemy) came into vogue. The internal practice was starting to use the *Waidan* terminology for internal processes and body functions and parts and this led to confusion, especially with the early Western investigators of Taoist alchemy, making them doubt whether some texts referred to experimental alchemy or to the internal art. Several traditions started to evolve within Taoist traditions and also outside of these, following their own goals. The late Tang and the Song periods (from the tenth century onwards) are well known for the *sanjiao heyi* (三教合一) idea: the three teachings had to become one; Taoists, Buddhists and (Neo-)Confucianists all found ways to integrate the other doctrines into their own systems. The tradition that we investigate was born in this period and therefore reflects this trend. Its early practitioners were well versed in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. They did not necessarily claim to be Taoists, they referred to themselves as being practitioners of Jindan, stating that all else did not lead to what was expected. One should therefore be careful about calling these people Taoists or Buddhists, they were in fact dedicated to alchemy before anything else. They probably devoted most of their attention to the internal practice. They opposed to the view that minor methods such as breathing, methods and doing exercises could lead to the alchemical goals and tried to separate actual alchemical results from illusions and minor achievements. The Southern Tradition (Nanzong 南宗) came about in the Southeastern part of China, the Tiantai Mountains (famous for Chan and Tiantai Buddhism also) being its centre. A man from Tiantai, Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (984/7-1082), came to be regarded as the main representative of the Southern Jindan Tradition. His writings influenced many later alchemists and were somewhat canonized in Neidan circles. Whereas Zhang Boduan did not seem to be concerned about founding a true lineage, later practitioners such as Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (12th - 13th century) probably did (he was an ordained Taoist master) and he traced his knowledge of Jindan back to Zhang Boduan. In the end, after the birth of the new Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Authenticity) Taoism in the Yuan period. The Zhang Boduan 'tradition' was integrated into Quanzhen as the 'Southern Tradition'. It continues to exist up till now, although very few "official" practitioners are left. Practices and ideas of the Southern Jindan have been spread among the Chinese, leading to both corruption of the practices with some (e.g. with those who made a mere sexual technique out of it) and thorough understanding and reaching the goals with others. The past twenty years a lot of information has been gathered and many books on internal alchemy have been published by Chinese scholars, not in the least by Hu Fuchen and a clearer picture of this culture is the result of their work. However, many aspects and details remain hidden and some common interpretations are misleading, to say the least. Serious Western research into Jindan started in the first half of the twentieth century and culminated in the voluminous work, called *Science and Civilisation in China* (which includes chapters on metallurgy, the external and internal aspects of Chinese alchemy), of Joseph Needham and his team.

Our present volume contains the translation of two short texts by famous practitioners of Jindan: *The Four Hundred Characters of Jindan* by Zhang Boduan and *A piece of Writing on Returning to the Source* by Zhang's disciple Shi Tai 石泰 (1022-1158). It also contains the short biographies of these two figures. Both texts are regarded as being more accessible than the more voluminous

works of Zhang Boduan (e.g. the *Wuzhenpian* 悟真篇, *A Piece of Writing on Understanding Authenticity*) and Bai Yuchan and are therefore suitable to open this series of works on the Southern Tradition. Some researchers of Jindan claim that these texts were not original works of Zhang and Shi, but that they were written by Bai Yuchan to propagate his allegiance to this tradition. This cannot be certified and since they all use the same terminology and similar interpretations of it, this does not really matter. The essence of the practice can be found in these writings. The texts stress that the practice itself should be learned under the guidance of a suitable and qualified teacher who is able to pass on the *koujue* 口訣 (oral and visual formulae). The methods, goals, aspirations, problems, and final results of the Southern Tradition will not be explained in this volume. To help the serious student we have compiled a Jindan dictionary, which explains the terminology of both texts. It is the first attempt to make it grow into a complete dictionary of Southern Jindan terminology as we make more texts available in English translation. But, even with the possibility to use the dictionary, the practice of Jindan remains difficult and even dangerous. It is my duty to warn all too eager students who wish to try and create their own “cinnabar” without the supervision and guidance of a teacher. Going about recklessly can cause serious problems. Be warned!

This book is not for sale anymore, but in the near future we expect to publish two new books that are based on the contents of this one.