

Transforming the Void

*Embryological Discourse and Reproductive Imagery
in East Asian Religions*

Edited by

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Cosmos, Body, and Gestation in Taoist Meditation

Dominic Steavu

Of old, there were those who obtained the One
Heaven obtained the One and so it was bright.
Earth obtained the One and so it was firm.
Spirit obtained the One and so it was numinous.
Valley obtained the One and so it was replete.
The myriad things obtained the One and so they were born.
The lords and kings obtained the One and so the world was ordered.

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Introducing the Problem: Literal and Symbolic Embryology

This study originally stems from my attempts to answer a question that occurs to many upon first encountering Neidan 內丹 (Internal Alchemy) descriptions of the formation of the sagely embryo (*shengtai* 聖胎).² A striking feature of some of these descriptions is that they map the development of this Internal Elixir (*neidan* 內丹) onto physiological processes. In drawing these parallels, the accuracy of biological details is so remarkable that one cannot help but wonder if the passages were literal. That is to say, perhaps Neidan expositions on “symbolic” embryological development were to be understood by readers as identical to and inseparable from accounts of actual in utero developmental

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations to English are my own.

² In Neidan, the term “sagely embryo” takes on a slightly different meaning; Fabrizio Pregadio, *Awakening to Reality; The “Regulated Verses” of the Wuzhen pian, A Taoist Classic of Internal Alchemy* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2009), 82, n. 41, notes that Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) defines the terms as the “the embryo of a saint” (*shengren zhi tai* 聖人之胎) in his *Xiangyan poyi* 象言破疑 (Smashing Doubts on Metaphorical Language). On the reading of *shengtai* as “sagely embryo” versus “embryo of sagehood” or “sagehood,” see, in this volume, the essay by Catherine Despeux; I am deeply indebted to Fabrizio Pregadio and Grégoire Espeset for closely reading this chapter and offering numerous and valuable suggestions.

physiology rather than merely figurative instructions for generating a “metaphorical” or incorporeal embryo in the context of a meditation practice.³

The following passage from *Awakening to Reality* (Wuzhen pian 悟真篇) aptly illustrates the ambiguity between biological and soteriological registers:

Three, Five, One – all is in these three words
 But truly rare are those who understand them in past and present times.
 East is 3, South is 2, together they make 5
 North is 1, West is 4, they are the same.
 Wu and ji dwell on their own, their birth number is 5
 When the three families see one another, the Infant coalesces.
 The Infant is the One holding True Breath
 In ten months the embryo is complete –
 this is the foundation for entering sainthood.⁴

三五一都三個字，古今明者實然稀。
 東三南二同成五，北一西方四共之。
 戊己自居生數五，三家相見結嬰兒。
 嬰兒是一含真氣，十月胎圓入聖基。

These lines simultaneously refer to a soteriological path (Internal Alchemy) and a physiological process (gestation). The two registers are imbricated. A third layer, this time cosmological, affords communication between the pre-

3 For the purposes of this paper, I use meditation, contemplation, and visualisation interchangeably. Because their contours are less defined in comparison to their early medieval and medieval equivalents, practices found in Han-era (206 BCE–220 CE) texts or before will generally be referred to as “self-cultivation.”

4 Translation from Pregadio 2009, 63; adding what is referred to either as their “birth numbers,” “generative numbers,” or “precelestial emblematic numbers” of Wood (3) and Fire (2), a total of 5 is obtained. It represents True Yin (*zhenyin* 真陰) (Mercury). Similarly, adding Metal (4) and Water (1) yields 5. In this case, the number represents True Yang (*zhenyang* 真陽) (Lead). Wu 戊 and ji 己 are stems associated with Soil, and thus the Centre, and the number 5, which here symbolises Intention, the driving force of the alchemical process. When these three fives, the “three families” of True Yin, True Yang, and Intention are brought together, the sagely embryo or “Infant” (Ying'er 嬰兒) takes shape; in other words, the Elixir (*dan* 丹) is produced and nourished. The mention of the embryo's ten-month development here imparts the notion of a gradual process of refinement. For a full annotation of this poem, see Pregadio 2009, 64–65.

vious two by likening the generation of the Internal Elixir and embryological development to cosmogony – the process by which the universe is produced.⁵

This study attempts to elucidate the means by which different constellations of knowledge, namely, the medical, the soteriological, and the cosmological, were brought together and eventually came to maturity in Neidan descriptions of the inner embryo. As it deals with the formative phases of this discourse, a large proportion of the following analysis is focused on prefiguring developments in Six Dynasties (220–581) meditation sources. A number of scholars have previously signalled the importance of early medieval meditation practices in the emergence of Neidan, especially those tied to the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) corpus.⁶ In so doing, their research has challenged the assumptions that Neidan evolved as a simple interiorisation of Waidan 外丹 (External Alchemy or laboratory alchemy) in combination with an esotericisation or encryption of earlier Taoist sexual rites. However, by analysing pre-Shangqing materials related to previously ignored Sanhuang 三皇 (Three Sovereigns) visualisations, the present chapter departs from earlier scholarship in establishing that some Shangqing meditations pertinent to the emergence of Neidan were in fact mere reformulations of earlier practices.⁷

5 As will be highlighted below, this is in fact the reversal of a generative process, but the parallel remains valid.

6 See Isabelle Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing dans l'histoire du taoïsme* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1984), vol. 1, 176–80; and by the same author, “Original Contributions of *Neidan* to Taoism and Chinese Thought,” in *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*, Livia Kohn and Sakade Yoshinobu, eds. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1989); see also Michel Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T’ao Hung-ching,” in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 169–178; and Sakade Yoshinobu 坂出祥伸, “Zui-Tō jidai ni okeru fukutan to naikan to naitan 隋唐時代における服丹と内観と内丹,” in *Chūgoku kodai yōjō shisō no sōgōteki kenkyū* 中国古代養生思想の総合的研究, *ibid.*, ed. (Tokyo: Hiraakawa shuppansha, 1988).

7 Katō Chie 加藤千恵 *Furō fushi noshintai: dōkyō to tai no shisō* 不老不死の身体: 道教と胎の思想 (Tokyo: Taishukan shoten, 2002) and Fabrizio Pregadio, “Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy,” in *Daoism in History, Essays in Honour of Liu Ts’un-yan*, Benjamin Penny, ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), are among the few who have looked at pre-Shangqing texts for precursors to key notions of Neidan. The two most cited texts in this respect are the late second-century *Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 (Laozi’s Central Scripture; DZ 1168) and the late third- to early fifth-century *Taishang lingbao wufu xu* 太上靈寶五符序 (Array of the Five Lingbao Talismans of the Most High; DZ 388). Both Katō Chie and Pregadio omit Sanhuang (Three Sovereigns) sources in their analysis, despite the fact that these also yield crucial clues to the puzzle of early medieval contemplation practices and the elaboration of Neidan. On the *Laozi zhongjing*, the *Wufu xu*, and their relationship to the Sanhuang corpus, see below.

Many of these centre on the generative cosmic principle/deity Taiyi 太一, the Great Unity or Great One, whose transformative functions – both on the scale of the cosmos and within the confines of the body – are evocative of those of the One (*yi* 一) in Neidan. My aim is not to deny the importance of Shangqing in the emergence of Neidan – a fact that has been firmly established. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that Neidan had multiple progenitors. The research of Katō Chie and Fabrizio Pregadio has tended in this direction, showing that Neidan emerged not only from Waidan and Shangqing, but rather that it developed through the intermediary of variegated Six Dynasties visualisation practices involving the inner gods. In many ways, this article serves as a complement to their work, focusing however, on the hitherto overlooked Sanhuang corpus and the role of Taiyi. The proposed genealogical link uniting Neidan and Sanhuang becomes all the more clear when considering sources that focus on gestational imagery in particular.

By concentrating on embryological discourse in what constitutes some of the earliest visualisation practices in China, we may identify three developments that led to the formulation of Neidan as a formalised system and, at the same time, constitute identifying features for the tradition: A) the anthropomorphisation of cosmic principles within the body; B) the combination of multiple cosmological models; and C) the use of cosmogonic reversion as a template for practice. As a corollary, the analysis of relevant materials will assist us in answering the initial question of how medieval and early medieval practitioners negotiated semantic drift from one style of reasoning to another, and, more pointedly, if any distinction was made between what, from certain vantage points, would appear as incompatible “symbolic” and “literal” discursive registers.

1 The Gods Within: Anthropomorphising the Cosmos

That conception and the subsequent formation of the embryo are explained in terms of cosmogony is not unique to Neidan. In fact, the association between the genesis of individual life and the genesis of the cosmos had been established since the earliest surviving descriptions of embryology. Two notable early embryologies occur in the “Shuidi 水地” (“Water and Earth”) chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子 (fourth century BCE) and the “Jingshen 精神” (“Essences and

Spirit”) chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (139 BCE).⁸ Both explicitly infuse procreation with a pronounced cosmogonic dimension, paving the way for later soteriological interpretations. By linking the body (more precisely, its physiology) to cosmology through a correlative idiom, gestation and parturition were considered cosmic events, and the principles governing them could be harnessed to actively extend one’s life or otherwise augment it.

In the early medieval period however, embryologies that were cosmogonically framed underwent three significant changes – listed A, B, and C in three sections below – that contributed to bridging the conceptual chasm that originally separated them from Neidan. These transformations enabled embryological discourse to transition from an analogical trope in discussions of self-cultivation to a full-fledged path to spiritual cultivation in which literal and figurative semantic registers were superimposed.

A) The first change concerns the increasingly anthropomorphic representation of the cosmological constituents of the body. This is observable in numerous sources that broadly deal with self-cultivation from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) onward. In a nutshell, the cosmic constituents of the body that are described in the self-cultivation practices of earlier texts, such as the *Huainanzi* or *Guanzi*, transition from impersonal entities (essence, spirits, *qi*, the five viscera as microcosmic incarnations of the Five Agents) to anthropomorphic bodily gods. Inklings of a cosmology incorporating an inner pantheon of somatic deities are already discernible in the “Weft Text” (*weishu* 緯書) corpus of the Eastern Han (25–220 CE). The *Longyu hetu* 龍魚河圖 (River Chart of the Dragon Fish) for instance, provides the personal names of the deities of the Five Offices (*wuguan* 五官) – the five external organs corresponding to the Five Agents.⁹ A similar, somewhat longer list of inner gods and their appellations appears in the early medieval *Taishang lingbao wufu xu* 太上靈寶五符序 (Array of the Five Lingbao Talismans of the Most High; DZ 388, ca. fourth century; hereafter *Wufu xu*), the *Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 (Laozi’s Central Scripture; DZ 1168, third century) and materials tied to the

8 See *Guanzi* 39, 813–816; and *Huainanzi* 7.2, 505–506, respectively; for an overview of these embryological sources, see the section on “Early Embryologies in East Asia” in the introduction to this volume.

9 Robinet 1984, vol. 1, 29 and 63; and Yasui Kōzan 安居香山 and Nakamura Shōhachi 中村璋八, *Isho shūsei* 識緯集成 (Tokyo: Meitoku shuppansha, 1971–1992), vol. 6, 93 and 97; see Pregadio 2006, 129, who suggests the *Wufu xu* may preserve the original passage from the *Longyu hetu*.

Sanhuang wen 三皇文 (Writ of the Three Sovereigns).¹⁰ The significance of this concurrence and the role of the meditations relevant to these three texts will be highlighted in the last section, below. Around the second or third centuries, the *Taishang huangting neijing yujing* 太上黃庭內景玉經 (Jade Scripture of Inner Effulgences of the Yellow Court; DZ 331, hereafter *Huangting neijing*) supplies a full elaboration on the anthropomorphised cosmic principles of the body in its rich visualisation practices:

The deity of the heart is Cinnabar Origin. His style is Preserving Numina. The deity of the lungs is Brilliant Flower. His style is Achieving the Void. The deity of the liver is Dragon Smoke. His style is Holding Light] [...]. The deity of the kidneys is Dark Abyss. His style is Raising Children. The deity of the spleen is Constant Existence. His style is Resting Place of Spirit. The deity of the gallbladder is Dragon Resplendence. His style is Imposing Brightness. In the six receptacles and the five viscera, the spirits embody the essence. They all reside in the heart and spin Heaven's warp. Preserving them night and day affords one long life.¹¹

心神丹元字守靈，肺神皓華字虛成，肝神龍煙字含明， [...] 腎神玄冥字育嬰，脾神常在字魂停，膽神龍曜字威明。六腑五臟神體精，皆在心內運天經，晝夜存之自長生。

The text outlines a scheme in which, on the basis of the Five Agents, each viscus or “receptacle” is granted a divine identity. Anthropomorphisation was a critical process for making cosmic principles easier to visualise and to relate to. Moreover, once they were visualised as anthropomorphic “living” beings rather than purely abstract principles, the generative and procreative functions that resulted from their interactions could also be emphasised.

The Five Agents supply an important part of the framework in the *Huangting neijing*, but these are complemented by new cosmological elements that partially shift the focal point below the five viscera. Indeed, the three Cinnabar

10 Compare *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 1.21ab to *Wushang biyao* 無上祕要 (Peerless Secret Essentials; DZ 1138), 5.12b–15b; the latter cites Sanhuang sources; also see *Laozi zhongjing* 22, 23, and 26.

11 *Taishang huangting neijing yujing* DZ 331, 8 (3a); although the passage mentions the five viscera, six are actually listed as the gallbladder makes its appearance again. The gallbladder on its own sometimes represents all of the “six repositories” (*liufu* 六腑).

Fields (*dantian* 丹田) introduce a new set of anthropomorphised bodily gods that share the inner landscape with those of the five viscera. In visualisations that rely on this structure, the focus is redirected onto areas of the body that traditionally correspond to where the process of gestation takes place. Featuring deities such as the Cinnabar Child (Zidan 子丹) or “the embryo” (*tai* 胎), the imagery in these sections of the *Huangting neijing* is resolutely reproductive.¹²

The three Cinnabar Fields are first mentioned in the *Laozi ming* 老子銘 (Inscription for Laozi; 165 CE) and the *Wangzi Qiao bei* 王子喬碑 (Stele to Wangzi Qiao; 165 CE), and then developed in the *Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity; 330 CE). Much like earlier cardiocentric self-cultivation practices from the *Huainanzi* or *Guanzi*, this model still preserves the heart, the Middle Cinnabar Field, or the so-called Crimson Palace (*jiangong* 絳宮), as an important locus of practice. Together with the Muddy Pellet (*niwan* 泥丸), the Upper Cinnabar Field located between the eyebrows, these sites constitute parallel structures to a new point of meditational interest, the Lower Cinnabar Field.¹³ Depending on the sources, it is located 1.3, 2, 2.4, 3, or 3.6 inches (*cun* 寸) behind and/or below the navel.¹⁴ It is sometimes known as the Gate of Destiny (*mingmen* 命門). During the Six Dynasties, the Lower Cinnabar Field appears as a new fulcrum of visualisation practices.¹⁵

Inhaling and exhaling the primordial *qi* in order to seek immortality,
 The Immortal Elder Prince is seemingly before one [’s eyes],
 The Vermillion Bird exhales and inhales the white stone source,
 Knotting the essence, nourishing the womb, one generates a body,
 Detaining the embryo, halting the essence, one achieves long life.
 The three *qi* swirl clockwise around the brightness of the Nine Ways,
 Correct Unity contains efflorescence, there is plenitude!

12 See *Huangting neijing* 17 and 35 for the Cinnabar Child and *Huangting neijing* 1, 15, and 20 for the embryo; on the notion of embryo in meditation practices in general, see Katō Chie 2002.

13 See *Baopuzi neipian* 18.323; for the Wangzi Qiao Bei see Gil Raz’s treatment, *The Emergence of Daoism: Creation of Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2012), 80–86; for the *Laozi ming* see Raz, *ibid.*, 86–87; and Anna Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1969), 44, 58–59, and 129.

14 Fabrizio Pregadio, “Dantian,” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, *ibid.*, ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 302.

15 See Michael Puett, “Becoming Laozi: Cultivating and Visualizing Spirits in Early-Medieval China,” *Asia Major* 23.1 (2010).

Gazing afar, heart united, [the plenitude] is like a constellation,
 Below the Golden Chamber, it is possible not to decline,¹⁶
 Postponing the whitening of my hair, and making me revert to an Infant!¹⁷

呼吸元氣以求仙，仙公公子似在前，朱鳥吐縮白石源，結精育胞化生身，留胎止精可長生。三氣右徊九道明，正一含華乃充盈，遙望一心如羅星，金室之下可不傾，延我白首反孩嬰。

In this passage, practitioners concentrate on two locations: they harness *qi* that is purified in the heart and direct it below, to the Lower Cinnabar Field, in order to nourish the embryo.

2 Correlating Models, Imbricating Discourses

B) Precisely, it is the combination of multiple cosmological models as in the above passage which constitutes a second development of embryological discourse in the early medieval period. The integration of various models resulted in a denser web of correspondences. The *Huangting jing* is a good example of this; both the Five Agents and the three Cinnabar Fields inform its practices. The *Laozi zhongjing* is another example. In this text, the Five Agents and the associated metaphor of rulership are still omnipresent, but the focus appears to be more squarely on the Lower Cinnabar Field and its reproductive functions:

The Lower Cinnabar Field is the root of the human. It is where essence and spirit are kept. It is the origin of the five *qi*. It is the residence of the Red Child. Men use it to store their semen. Women use it to store their menses.¹⁸ It regulates childbirth. It is the gateway to the union and harmonisation of Yin and Yang. It lies three inches below the navel, attached to the spine. It is the root of the two kidneys. The inside of the Lower Cinnabar Field is red in the centre, green on the left, yellow on the right. It is white above, black below. It is located within a space that is four

16 可不傾 can alternatively be read “it is possible not to slant,” that is, to keep to the centre during meditation.

17 *Huangting jing* DZ 331, 20 (7a).

18 A version of this passage cited in Liang Qiuzi's 梁丘子 (fl. 722–729) *Huangting neijing yujing zhu* 黃庭內景玉經註 (Commentary on the Jade Scripture of the Inner Effulgences of the Yellow Court) preserved in the *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds; DZ 1032), 11.36a, reads instead: “it is where women store embryos” 女人以藏胎。

inches in circumference; and therefore, as for that which lies three inches below the navel, it is said to be patterned after Heaven, Earth, and humanity. Heaven is one, Earth is two, humanity is three, and the seasons are four. Hence we speak of four inches. It is [also] patterned on the Five Agents, thus it has the five colours. [...] Taiyi enters the Yellow Court [the spleen]. He fills the Great Granary [the stomach] and nourishes the Red Child. Then, again, he enters the Great Abyss [the navel]. If you suddenly do not know where he is, then meditate on him again. Do so until [his] *qi* returns to the Lower Cinnabar Field and stops. Constantly meditate on the Mother of the Dao of the Mysterious Radiance of the Great One, nourishing the perfected Cinnabar Child [who is] your own self and your own original name. Do not forget this.¹⁹

丹田者人之根也。精神之所藏也。五氣之元也。赤子之府。男子以藏精。女子以藏月水。主生子，合和陰陽之門戶也。在臍下三寸，附著脊膂，兩腎根也。丹田之中，中赤，左青，右黃，上白，下黑，方圓四寸之中；所以在臍下三寸者，言法天地人：天一，地二，人三，時四。故曰四寸，法五行故有五色。[...] 太一入黃庭，滿太倉，養赤子，復入太淵，忽忽不知所在。復念太一，氣還入丹田中止。常念太一玄光道養真人子丹，正吾身也，自兆名也，勿忘之。

Earlier sources largely depersonalised the meditative experience in favour of an eventual dilution of the self and individual consciousness in the Dao.²⁰ Conversely, early medieval sources anthropomorphised cosmic principles and brought them “down” to practitioners, within their very bodies. Adepts strove to reproduce a perfected, primordial version of themselves; identification with the end result of the practice was wholesale and completely individualised. Successful practitioners no longer modelled themselves on a lofty ruler who merely emulated the Dao. With the help of nourishment provided by Taiyi (who takes on a parental role), adepts effectively recreated an “original self” that was identified as the “son of the Dao” (*dao zhi zi* 道之子).²¹ Likewise, other passages from the *Laozi zhongjing* refer to the Cinnabar Child either as the

19 *Laozi zhongjing* 17 in *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, 18.14ab; see Alexander Iliouchine’s “A Study of the Central Scripture of Laozi (*Laozi zhongjing*)” (MA Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 2011), 44–45, for a partial translation of the passage; see also Katō Chie 加藤千恵 “*Rōshi chūkyō* to naitan shisō no genryū 「老子中經」と内丹思想の源流,” *Tōhō shūkyō* 東方宗教 87 (1996).

20 See Romain Graziani “The subject and the sovereign: exploring the self in early Chinese self-cultivation,” in *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 479–485, and 497.

21 See *Laozi zhongjing* 11.

small lad (*xiao tongzi* 小童子) or as the Red Child (Chizi 赤子), underscoring the procreative dimension to its visualisations.²² Kristofer Schipper has in fact suggested that the entire text is a thinly veiled account of gestation and embryological processes.²³

The elaboration of new cosmological models congruous with previous ones, in conjunction with an emphasis on visualising perfected embryonic versions of the self, stimulated the expression of a soteriological potential that had remained unexploited in some of the earlier self-cultivation sources considered above. Associated with both viscera and Cinnabar Fields, the deity Taiyi proved compatible with multiple sets of cosmological symbols.²⁴ In early medieval materials, Taiyi and its symbolic associations also appear to facilitate the interpenetration of medical and soteriological semantic registers. The “Sanhuang sanyi jing 三皇三一經” (Scripture of the Three Sovereigns [for Meditating on] the Three Ones), hereafter “Sanyi jing,” a short visualisation treatise from around the fourth century, illustrates the point most clearly.

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- 22 For mentions of “the small lad” (*xiao tongzi*) see for example, *Laozi zhongjing* 35 and 37; for the Red Child (Chizi), see *Laozi zhongjing* 17 (translated above), 19, 21 and 30; for passages that refer to him as the Cinnabar Child, see *Laozi zhongjing* 5, 12, 15, 17 (translated above), 23, 30, 36, 37, 45. Chizi, the Red Child, may also be rendered as the Infant, although this translation omits any reference to the colour red, which, as that of the centre of the lower *dantian*, is of import here. As for the term Zidan, it is usually translated as Cinnabar Child. A more technically accurate rendering would be “Redlet” or “Little Red,” as the diminutive *zi* 子 (“small”; “little”) can also appear as a prefix in compounds. I am indebted to Fabrizio Pregadio for drawing this to my attention; for more on the Red Child in the *Laozi zhongjing*, see Maeda Shigeki 前田繁樹, “*Rōshi chūkyō* oboegaki 「老子中經」 覺書,” in Sakade 1988, 488–490; the Red Child also appears in the *Dongzhen taishang suling dongyuan dayou miaojing* DZ 1314, 27a–28b, and 31b–32a, as the presiding deity of the Upper Cinnabar Field; he is also mentioned in the *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 1.13a, as the Cinnabar Child.
- 23 Kristofer Schipper, “The Taoist Body,” *History of Religions* 17.3/4 (1978): 355–386, and 370–371.
- 24 There is a wealth of literature on Taiyi in multiple languages; among them see Li Ling’s 李零 “*Taiyi*’ *chongbai de kaogu yanjiu* ‘太一’ 崇拜的考古研究,” in *Zhongguo fangshu kao xu* 中国方术续考, *ibid.*, ed. (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2000). Donald Harper has translated the chapter into English; see Li Ling, “An Archaeological Study of Taiyi 太一 (Grand One) Worship,” *Early Medieval China* 2 (1996); see also Michel Teboul, “Sur quelques particularités de l’uranographie polaire chinoise,” *T’oung Pao* 71 (1985); and Qian Baocong 錢寶琮, “Taiyi kao 太一攷,” *Yanjing xuebao* 燕京學報 12 (1932).

It opens with an exercise that enjoins adepts to move Taiyi from its abode in the Upper Cinnabar Field to the Middle Cinnabar Field, in the heart.²⁵ Once the migration is completed, the deity, who appears as a “young lad” (Taiyi *tongzi* 太一童子) in crimson vestments, is kept in that locus through periodic visualisation exercises.²⁶ In the second step to the technique, practitioners are told to visualise the Taiyi from “within the heart” (*xinzhong* 心中) in a new location, namely, inside or atop of the spleen.²⁷ We may discern here a visualisation sequence that plots the trajectory of Taiyi along the three Cinnabar Fields, progressively moving him from the Upper Cinnabar Field to the Lower. Indeed, the exercise culminates in the visualisation of Taiyi below the navel, between the kidneys – a method that is reproduced almost verbatim in *Laozi zhongjing*. This section of the “Sanyi jing” benefits from a lengthy explanatory note to clarify the deity’s generative powers:

Taiyi is the essence of the womb and of the embryo. It is the ruler of metamorphosis. The *hun* and *po* souls are generated from the spirit of the embryo; the life *qi* is generated from the womb matrix. They transform and merge with Dijun (the Imperial Lord). [All these elements] blend to form a human being. Therefore, the god Taiyi is the mother of life. The venerable Dijun is the father of life. [When] father and mother are originally joined, they are known as primordial *qi*. [When] they transform correspondingly into separate forms they are called “father” and “mother.” [...] If you know these names and are cautious not to divulge them to others, and if you visualise [these gods] in your body, you will obtain long life and evade death. [...] Your form will not enter the Earth. Jade lads and jade maidens will assist you in entering the Nine Heavens [...]. When [Dijun] and Taiyi merge, they are also called the Primordial Lord Taiyi. Neither male nor female, its brilliant radiance is the most marvelous. Sometimes it manifests as Lord Lao, sometimes as the Infant. Its responses are inexhaustible, its transformations boundless.²⁸

太一者，胞胎之精，變化之主，魂魄生於胎神，命炁生於胞府，變合帝君，混化為人。故太一之神，生之母也。帝君之尊，生之父也。父

25 On Taiyi and cosmogony, see below.

26 *Dongshen badi miaojing jing jing* 洞神八帝妙精經 (Scripture of the Wondrous Essence of the Eight Emperors of the Storehouse for Divinity; DZ 640) 2b–3a; that the *Laozi zhongjing* 25 contains essentially the same passage is indicative of the close ties between the meditation manuals of the Six Dynasties.

27 *Badi miaojing jing* DZ 640, 3ab.

28 *Badi miaojing jing* DZ 640, 4ab; cf. *Laozi zhongjing* 25.

母本合，號曰元炁，應化分形，號曰父母。 [...] 知此名字，慎勿告人，存之在身，長生不死 [...] 形不入地，玉童玉女，侍入九天 [...]。 [帝君] 與太一混合，亦號太一元君，非男非女，光明妙絕，或為老君，或為嬰兒，應感無窮，變化無極也。

This part of the meditation exercise provides what appears to be a literal description of conception. It establishes Taiyi, a cosmogonic deity contained in individuals, as relevant to obstetric concerns. In particular, Taiyi is described as overseeing the intra-uterine creation of human life and subsequent development of the embryo. After a series of combinations and metamorphoses of various cosmic components, a “person” is generated in the area that corresponds to the Lower Cinnabar Field.²⁹ Although the passage appears in a meditation manual, it is not entirely clear if it describes a cosmo-biological process that spontaneously occurs during conception or something that is to be merely visualised in the context of self-cultivation; most likely, it is both.

In contrast to earlier sources, in which clinical or clinically inspired expositions of embryological development were used as arguments in demonstrating the various levels of correspondence between the human body and the cosmos, early medieval texts like the “Sanyi jing” make no effort to isolate theological discourse from its medical counterpart. The bonds between cosmos, body, and soteriology that were only implied in earlier meditation practices are, by the early medieval period, reinforced and affirmed. In the above example, the passage closes with an iteration that equates the physiological product of procreation – the “person,” or the Infant (*ying'er* 嬰兒) – with the hierogamic product of a spiritual meditation – Taiyi (see Fig. 3.1). Moreover, and quite significantly, the gestational meditation begins and ends with Taiyi. The process is one of reversion. The Infant that has been generated is not a new, distinct individual; it is the seed of a perfected self to which the practitioner has returned. In this sense, reversion is the antithesis of a conventional embryology, although both follow the same sequence: the developmental steps that the embryo undergoes culminate in a human being, whereas those same

29 In this passage, the word “embryo” *tai* 胎 is applied to an unfinished being of spirit (*shen* 神) and essence (*jing* 精) that has not yet received the essence (*jing*) and *qi* of the womb (*bao* 胞). In a nutshell, Taiyi provides essence for both the womb and the embryo; the womb combines this essence with its *qi*, derived from Dijun. The embryo joins its own essence with spirit, in the form of *hun* and *po* souls, components of Dijun. When both womb and embryo are united the resulting product is a [perfected] person, an “Infant,” who like the deified Laozi, is an embodiment of the primordial Taiyi.

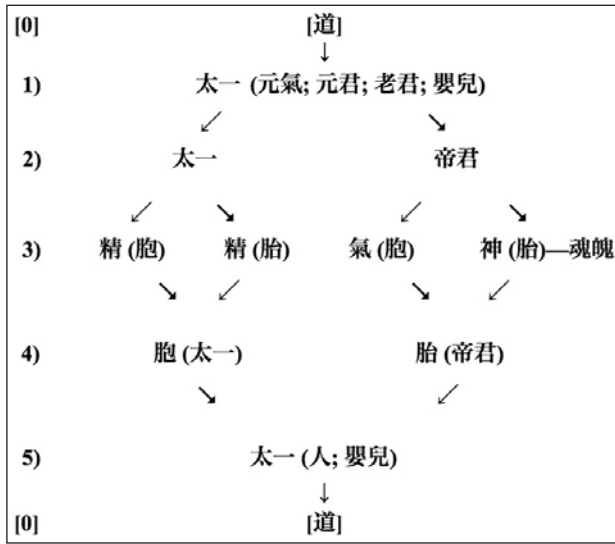


FIGURE 3.1
 The five steps of gestation described in the “Sanyijing” 三一經 (“Scripture on the Three Ones”) from the Dongshen badi miaojing jing 洞神八帝妙精經 (Scripture of the Wondrous Essence of the Eight Emperors; DZ 640), 3ab. AUTHOR’S INTERPRETATION.

steps in reversion culminate in a pre-conceptive state of unity between the individual, the perfected self (Taiyi; the Infant), and cosmic unity (Taiyi).

3 Taiyi and Cosmogonic Reversion

C) The articulation of reversion as a fully developed soteriological avenue is the third important development that embryology underwent in the process of its transition to Neidan. Reversion appears in Warring States (475 BCE-221 BCE) materials, including the *Laozi Daodejing* 老子道德經 (Laozi’s Book of the Way and Virtue) and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, in notions such as “reversion to the origin” (*huanyuan* 還元), “returning to the root” (*guigen* 歸根; *fanben* 返本), or more generally, the idea of a “return” (*fan* 返; 反) to cosmic unity.³⁰ But it is not until the late third or early fourth centuries that reversion takes the form of a mature soteriology, in combination with factors A) and B) discussed above, in

30 See for example, *Laozi* 16, 25, 40 and 48; and *Zhuangzi* 11; see Lu Yusan 卢育三, “Fan zhe dao zhi dong’ zhuyi” 「反者道之动」 刍议, *Zhongguo zhexue shi yanjiu* 中国哲学史研究 (1987); and Isabelle Robinet, *Les commentaires du Tao t’i king jusqu’au VIIe siècle* (Paris: Collège de France, 1977), 66–71; on the notion of “returning to the root” specifically, see Ch’ien C.S. [Qian Zhongshu], “The Return of the Native,” *Philobiblon* 4 (1947); Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 220–224, provides a fascinating discussion on the theme of “reversion” in early self-cultivation practices.

texts such as the “Sanyi jing,” the *Huangting neijing*, or the *Laozi zhongjing*.³¹ The latter notably provides a glimpse of regressive chronology in its discussions of the Cinnabar Child but also, more broadly, the text displays an awareness of both cyclical and linear time patterns with respect to the proliferation and resorption of cosmic phenomena.³² Indeed, the *Laozi zhongjing* derives its alternate title, the *Changsheng yuli* 長生玉曆 (Jade Calendar of Long Life) from its pronounced concern for the flow of time. As Kristofer Schipper reflects, “... the *Jade Calendar* enables adepts to know the times of the Earth, that of conception and gestation, of life and death. It thereby permits them to rediscover the fundamental rhythm of the universe and to achieve union with the Dao.”³³

The rediscovery of the fundamental rhythms or processes of the Dao in seeking to attain unity with it would later become a central pattern of Neidan practice, in the context of which it is often referred to as “inversion” (*ni* 逆) or “reversal” (*diandao* 顛倒). The common term for reversion or return, *fan*, also connotes the action of turning one’s gaze inwards as in the compound *fanzhao* 反照, literally to “turn back the light” of sight in order to illuminate the plethora of anthropomorphised cosmic elements that make up the inner pantheon. Similarly, the introduction of the Cinnabar Fields and their linear structure, facilitated the development of regressive spiritual programmes based on embryological development. In some of these programmes, and in Neidan especially, regression only concerns the initial focus on the embryo, a return to the earliest stages of human development. The subsequent stages in the practice, which progress “upward” along the three Cinnabar Fields from conception, to gestation, and finally birth, follow the usual embryological order – there is nothing regressive.

The Five Agents offered a principally cyclical view of time favouring approaches that promoted a centripetal balance or harmony between cosmic principles. The favoured means of self-cultivation or even healing thus consisted of a “managerial” approach informed by governing metaphors (*zhi* 治).

31 The *Huangting neijing* DZ 331 offers a number of interesting passages in this respect; see, for instance, *Huangting neijing* 20, 25, and 30.

32 The eight nodes (*bajie* 八節) repeatedly appear as temporal markers. So do longer measurements, including those of the coinciding Three Primes (*sanyuan* 三元) every 36 years, and the ominous “meetings of Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi zhi hui* 天地之會) every 45, 90, 180, 360, 1,000, 3,600, 8,000, and 36,000 years; see for instance *Laozi zhongjing* 52, in *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, 19.16a–17a.

33 Translated from French in Kristofer Schipper, “Le calendrier de jade: note sur le *Laozi zhongjing*,” in *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, Huang Junjie and Erik Zürcher, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 79.

Conversely, the Cinnabar Fields proposed a model with a strong degree of chronological linearity, so that adepts can move with relative fluidity along the spectrum of creation. Taken as a whole, these three facets of early medieval self-cultivation, namely, A) the anthropomorphising and internalising of cosmic principles, B) the emergence of new cosmological models and their use in combination with previous ones, and C) the emphasis on trajectories of return, were decisive in articulating an embryological discourse that amalgamated medical, cosmological, and soteriological narratives in a way that would find its fullest expression in medieval Neidan.³⁴

The positing of Taiyi as the point of departure and end goal of reversion-inspired contemplations served as the cement holding these components together. It permitted the identification of the Infant or embryo with a state of cosmic unity.³⁵ Effectively, Taiyi's integration into the inner pantheon (especially in Sanhuang sources where, under the guise of the "Three Ones" [*sanyi* 三一], its hypostases are equated with the "Three Sovereigns") situated this state of cosmic unity within the body, along with the regressive cosmogonic process that leads to its attainment. Thus, this soteriological goal was within the grasp of every individual practitioner.

The importance of Taiyi as a cosmic deity can be traced to Warring States, Qin (221 BCE–206 BCE), and Han Dynasty materials, in which it was first and foremost equated with a primordial unity.³⁶ Second, Taiyi was also revered as

34 It should be stressed that in Neidan the inner gods disappear and revert to abstract cosmic principles.

35 Thus, practitioners do not aim to return to the Dao itself, but rather they aim to attain oneness with the Dao by reaching this state of cosmic unity. Taiyi is not ontologically equivalent to the Dao, nor is it a "female" entity or an asexual one. Taiyi is hermaphroditic, uniting both male and female attributes and espousing them accordingly. The same is true of the Infant/embryo; it is a boy ("pure yang" in alchemical terms), but it can manifest as either male or female, in the adept's image.

36 See, for instance, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals) 5.3 ("Dayue" 大樂); Sarah Allan, "The Great One, Water, and the *Laozi*: New Light from Guodian," *T'oung Pao* 89 (2003); and Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 "Zhong miao zhi men – bei ji yu tai yi, dao, taiji 眾妙之門——北極與太一, 道, 太極," *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 3 (Dec.1990); some scholars insist that in early China, Taiyi is identical to the Dao rather than being its first cosmogonic product; Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 114–118 and 148–150; Isabelle Robinet, "Lun Taiyi shengshui 論太一生水," *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 道家文化研究 17 (1999); and Qian Baocong 1932, 2449–2454, summarised in Li Ling 1996, 9, on which most later scholars relied. Qian's argument, relying primarily on original passages from the *Huainanzi* and the *Lüshi chunqiu* and their commentaries, rests on estab-

the deity of the Pole Star.³⁷ As such, it embodied fixity and centrality in the firmament, an axial point around which all other stars, Heaven, and the entire cosmos revolved. It notably figured as the pivot on divination boards or “cosmographs” (*shi* 式), a figurative center of the cosmos and fountainhead of the celestial river from which Heaven, Earth, and all else is generated. However, although a fixed and central point, Taiyi was not considered static. As we have seen in the Sanhuang meditation, it could descend into ritual areas, including the body, where it would circulate.³⁸ Third, as the nominal centre of Heaven, Taiyi was regarded as the unity from which the myriad things emerge. Indeed its generative and cosmogonic properties were celebrated from the late Warring States, and in some traditions its spirit was explicitly referred to as the “mother” (*mu* 母).³⁹

The “Taiyi sheng shui 太一生水” (“Taiyi Begets Water”) bamboo slips excavated from Guodian 郭店 tomb 1 (sealed ca. 300 BCE) in 1993 present a cosmogony that showcases the generative properties of reversion. Additionally, it is deployed in ten stages of development, much like the classical embryologies encountered above – microcosmic cosmogonies in and of themselves (see Fig. 3.2).⁴⁰ Moreover, anticipating the embryological process highlighted

lishing an ontological equivalence between the Dao and Unity (“the One”); yet the Dao is generally understood to both prefigure and encompass Unity.

- 37 It is notably described as a celestial deity in the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), the *Huainanzi*, and a number of Wefi Texts, such as the *Chunqiu yuanmin bao* 春秋元命苞 (The Spring and Autumn Annals Bud of Original Destiny) and *Chunqiu hecheng tu* 春秋合誠圖 (The Spring and Autumn Annals Diagrams of Harmonizing Sincerity); see Yasui and Nakamura, 1971–1992, vol. 4.1, 87–88 and vol. 4.2, 14, 19–20, respectively; for more on Taiyi’s astral origins, see Michel Teboul 1985; and Li Ling 2000.
- 38 In the *Huandi neijing Lingshu* 77 chapter on “Jiugong bafeng 九宮八風” (“The Nine Palaces and Eight Winds”), the movement of Taiyi throughout the celestial quadrants of the Nine Palaces is used to interpret and predict the occurrence of disease-causing winds from the eight directions. The fact that it is actually the Nine Palaces that move across Taiyi’s static position in the sky did not escape early Chinese astronomers and diviners; see Yamada Keiji 山田慶兒, “Kyūkū hachifū setsu to Shōshiha no tachiba 九宮八風説と少師派の立場,” *Tōhō gakuho* 東方學報 52 (1980).
- 39 See Allan 2003, 263–264, 276, and 283–284 for a discussion of this question and a list of relevant sources; Allan sees Taiyi as a female principle and an equivalent term to the Dao, a perspective that I do not share; see note 35 above. Taiyi, despite its generative (or “motherly”) functions, represents the point of unity that precedes the division of Yin and Yang (and thus male and female) and succeeds the vacuity of the Dao.
- 40 A facsimile of the slips is included in Donald Harper, “The Nature of Taiyi in the Guodian Manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*. Abstract Cosmic Principle or Supreme Cosmic Deity?” *Zhongguo tuchu ziliao yanjiu* 中國土出資料研究 5 (2001): 21–22, along with a transcription and translation on 3–4; for a detailed analysis of the text and its relation to the Guodian *Laozi*, see Allan 2003, who also provides a translation on page 261.

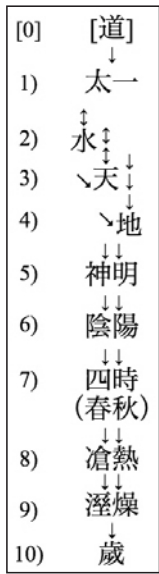


FIGURE 3.2
The ten-stage cosmogony from the “Taiyi sheng shui” 太一生水 (“Taiyi Begets Water”) Guodian 郭店 slips (ca. 300 BCE). AUTHOR’S INTERPRETATION.

in the “Sanyi jing,” the cosmogony described in the “Taiyi sheng shui” is recursive “as water and heaven each *fanbo* 反薄 (rejoin) Taiyi until Heaven and Earth exist as the first couple and the conditions for gamogenesis [genesis through sexuated pairs] are present.”⁴¹

Taiyi was recognised since the end of the Warring States as an anthropomorphised deity that oversaw genesis and thus, transformation or change as well. As a result, it became a key feature of early medieval visualisation practices during the Han and Six Dynasties, forming a crucial lynchpin linking the inner pantheon, vertical/linear cosmological models, and the reversion of cosmogonic processes. The slew of Guarding the One (*shouyi* 守一; or *baoyi* 抱一, Embracing the One) visualisations disseminated during the late Han and early Six Dynasties support this point.⁴² A variation on these visualisations generally referred to as Three Ones (*sanyi*) meditations – as in the aforementioned Sanhuang example – entailed visualising three hypostases of Taiyi as they took up temporary residence in the three Cinnabar Fields of the body. In these, the focus on the Lower Cinnabar Field and its coinciding with the general area of the womb or the “space between the kidneys” facilitated the drawing of

41 Harper 2001, 5.

42 On “Guarding the One,” see Xiao Dengfu 萧登福, “Daojiao ‘Shouyi’ xiuchifa zhi yuanqi ji qi yanbian” 道教“守一”修持法之源起及其演变, *Zhongjiaoxue yanjiu* 宗教学研究 1 (2006); and Robinet 1984, vol. 1, 30–32, and 41–43; and Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of Great Purity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 120–138.

reproductive and gestational parallels.⁴³ On the matter of the Three Ones in relation to the Sanhuang and Taiyi, some scholars have argued that in certain cultic contexts of the Qin and Han, the Three Ones, often listed as Taiyi and two hypostases, Tianyi 天一 and Diyi 地一, corresponded to the three sovereigns of the Sanhuang, namely, Tianhuang 天皇, Dihuang 地皇, and Renhuang 人皇.⁴⁴

With Taiyi's prominence in early medieval visualisations, the use of reproductive and gestational imageries in pursuit of a pre-cosmic unity became increasingly common. Taiyi and the association that stemmed from his late Warring States and early imperial cults encouraged the superimposition of biological (clinical, physiological, or "literal") and soteriological (religious, spiritual, or "figurative") embryological discourses. This blending of semantic layers set the stage for traditions that were elaborated around the parent notion of generative transformations – Neidan chief among them.

4 Sanhuang, Embryology, and the Birth of Neidan

The practice of Waidan is attested, in one form or another, since at least the second century BCE. The origins of Neidan, on the other hand, are conventionally dated to the eighth century CE, when the popularity and circulation of the *Zhouyi Cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Token for the Agreement of the Three According to the *Book of Changes*) effectively redefined Waidan and spawned Neidan. More concretely, the transition from Waidan to Neidan is typically explained as stemming from, on the one hand, increasing incidences of elixir poisoning and on the other hand, under the pronounced influence of ever more popular Buddhist contemplation methods, the internalisation of Waidan processes. It is also in this context, often associated with the esotericisation of

43 *Baopuzi neipian*, 18.323–25, opens with a reference to *Zhuangzi* 12 (通於一而萬事畢) and proceeds to detail the practice of "Guarding the One"; cf. *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 1.22b–23, for a similar line in a passage on guarding the Three Ones. The fact that both of these sources cite the *shouyi* or *baoyi* passages from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* highlights the kinship between Warring States understandings of "Guarding the One" and their Six Dynasties counterparts.

44 The latter "sovereign" is identified as Taihuang 泰皇 or Taihao 太昊 in early accounts. See Li Ling's concise summary of Rao Zongyi and Qian Baocong's opinions on the matter, along with a subsequent discussion in Allan 2003, 162–168; for the Sanhuang as the Three Ones and/or hypostases of Taiyi, see *Shiji* 6, and 28; and Isabelle Robinet, *Histoire du taoïsme des origines au XIVe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991), 194.

the “arts of the bedchamber” (房中術 *fangzhong shu*) or early Taoist rites of sexual union; the encryption of their explicit technical terms under a metaphorical veneer was a convenient way of preserving the practices after they had come to be considered unsavoury in polite society.⁴⁵ While these, especially the first two, are non-negligible factors, recent scholars such as Fabrizio Pregadio have suggested a more complex narrative of transition: “...the main feature that distinguishes *neidan* from earlier traditions” is not the transposition of the Elixir and its generation onto an inner plane, but rather “the replacement of a codified system (the pantheon of inner gods) with another codified system (correlative cosmology) both to construe the relation of the human being to the Dao and to frame the stages of one’s practice.”⁴⁶

This other codified system typifying *Neidan* expanded on the anthropomorphisation and internalisation of cosmic principles, but as Pregadio notes, again, “Reckoning that the elixir is to be found within, and in general, shifting the associated images to an inner plane, do not characterise *neidan* per se. *Neidan* reiterates and magnifies here the process of ‘interiorisation’ of earlier notions and [meditation] practices that had already distinguished Shangqing Daoism.”⁴⁷ Thus, although it most definitely contributed to its development, point A) discussed above is not a *Neidan* innovation. Whether or not Shangqing had that much to do with it is a question we will revisit in greater detail below, but, as gleaned from our discussion of early medieval materials, interiorisation is a characteristic of older traditions of meditation.

Returning to Pregadio’s findings, in his “Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Alchemy,” he posits that it is correlative cosmology and, more pointedly, the combination of various sets of cosmological symbols that exemplify *Neidan*. What the present study argues is that this too, as we have seen, is a development that was prefigured in earlier self-cultivation traditions, specifically with respect to Five Agents and Cinnabar Field models. To be clear, the combination of multiple models of cosmological symbols (such as the Five Agents and three Cinnabar Fields, of course, but also trigrams and hexagrams, heavenly stems and earthly branches, pitch pipes, lunar mansions, and, most importantly, the pre-celestial and post-celestial cosmogonic arrangements) in elaborate webs of correspondences is indeed an indisputable hallmark of

45 On this, see the chapter “The Yellow and the Red: Controversies over sexual practice” in Raz 2012.

46 Pregadio 2006, 149.

47 Ibid.

Neidan – but this fusion of symbols certainly predates Internal Alchemy.⁴⁸ Lastly, we posited that cosmogonic reversion, as a soteriological process, was an additional defining feature of Neidan that was equally rooted in early visualisation practices.

In conjunction, these three conditions paved the way for the adoption of embryological imagery and the intertwining of biological and soteriological semantic registers that many still mistakenly identify as an exclusive Neidan innovation. By tracing embryological discourse especially through a variety of self-cultivation currents, this study has attempted to show that Neidan is much heavily indebted to early medieval visualisation practices; it is genealogically much closer to Taoist meditations than it is to Waidan or the arts of the bedchamber.

There remains the question of which traditions of Taoist meditations were most directly responsible for the development of Neidan. Typically, the honour goes to Shangqing methods.⁴⁹ However, the fact that Shangqing codifiers were very apt at absorbing notions and practices from earlier currents, only to reformulate them and present them as their own, should not be overlooked.⁵⁰ Some of the most emblematic Shangqing passages concerning the generation of an inner embryo are inspired from early sources. The *Dongzhen taiyi dijun taidan yinshu dongzhen xuanjing* 洞真太一君太丹隱書洞真玄經 (Secret Scripture of the Great Elixir; DZ 1330, fourth-sixth century), for instance, contains a meditation that is almost identical to the one from the “Sanyi jing.”⁵¹ Although, in its current form, the Shangqing text is relatively disjointed and truncated in more than one place, it is reputedly composed of original revelations received by Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–386/388).

The Sanhuang meditation, on the other hand, is attributed to the considerably earlier source identified as the *Tian huang[ren] zhenyi zhi jing* 天皇[人]真一之經 (Scripture of the Celestial August [Person] on the True One), hereafter

48 On the synchronisation of multiple cosmological emblems in Neidan, see Pregadio's introduction to his *The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi, The Source of the Taoist Way of the Golden Elixir* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011).

49 See footnotes 6 and 7 above, and also Pregadio 2006, 142.

50 For more on this process, see Raz 2012, 210–256; and Michel Strickmann, *Le Taoïsme du Mao Chan: Chronique d'une révélation* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1981); Pregadio 2006, 126, also refers to this phenomenon without further elaborating.

51 Compare *Badi miaojing jing jing* DZ 640, 4ab, translated above, to *Dongzhen taiyi dijun taidan yinshu dongzhen xuanjing* DZ 1330, 26a–27b.

Huangren jing. The text is mentioned by name in the *Wufu xu*'s discussion on Taiyi visualisations. A corresponding passage in the *Baopuzi neipian* also cites it, without, it should be conceded, explicitly naming it.⁵² These are the two earliest extant sources that describe meditations on an internal Taiyi. Since both refer to the *Huangren jing* on the topic of Taiyi meditations, it appears that this earlier source would constitute the urtext on that specific variety of self-cultivation practice.⁵³ Both the *Wufu xu* and the *Baopuzi neipian* narrate how the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) received the coveted meditation manual from the Celestial Perfected August Person (Tianzhen Huangren 天真皇人) on Emei shan 峨眉山.⁵⁴ He obtained it, the story goes, immediately after receiving the *Sanhuang wen*. The latter is partially preserved in the *Dongshen badi miaojing jing jing* 洞神八帝妙精經 (Scripture of the Wondrous Essence of the Eight Emperors; DZ 640), the same text that houses the “Sanyi jing”.⁵⁵

52 *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 3.17a–18b; the complete passage, 3.17a–23b, forms a separate section, also independently preserved in the Taoist Canon under the title *Taishang dongxuan lingbao sanyi wuqi zhenjing* 太上洞玄靈寶三一五氣真經 (True Scripture on the Three Ones and the Five Pneumata; DZ 985).

53 There has been some debate about which of the two texts is earliest. Kobayashi Masayoshi 小林正美, “*Taijō reihō gofu jo no seisho katei no bunseki* 「太上靈寶五符序」の成書過程の分析,” *Tōhō shūkyō* 東方宗教 71 (1988): 28–29, argues that the *Baopuzi* predates the *Wufu xu*'s treatment of the Taiyi meditation, and that it is in fact the source for the latter; Wang Ming 王明, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 327, n. 6, on the other hand, suggests that the *Wufu xu* passage is earlier. The *Wufu xu* clearly names its source as the *Tian huang[ren] zhenyi zhi jing* (or the *Taishang taiyi zhenyi zhi jing* 太上太一真一之經 [Scripture on the Taiyi (Method) of the True One]), which is none other than the *Huangren shouyi jing* 皇人守一經 (Scripture of the August Person on Guarding the One) referred to in other sources.

54 *Baopuzi*, 18.324; the *Wufu xu* simply refers to him as the “August Person” (Huangren 皇人). Emei shan is also the site where the first human transmission of the *Sanhuang wen* to Bo He 帛和 occurred; see Gil Raz, “Creation of Tradition: The Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure and the Formation of Early Daoism,” (Phd dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2004), 187–199, for an annotated comparison of the *Wufu xu* and *Baopuzi* versions of the passage.

55 The same parable from the *Wufu xu* and the *Baopuzi* is related, with a few modifications, in a segment from *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, 33.11a–12a; it lists the name of the manual as the *Huangren shouyi jing*; a citation from this source also survives in the *Wushang biyao* DZ 138, 5.6b–7a; it stresses that only after the retinue of gods, officials, and ministers that form the inner pantheon are governed, and that once the blood is fortified and the *qi* purified, can the adept successfully embark on Taiyi meditations; the same lines are more or less repeated in *Baopuzi*, 18.326 and *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 3.20ab; see also, *Taishang dongxuan lingbao sanyi wuqi zhenjing* DZ 985, 2a.

Strongly suggesting parity between the “Sanyi jing” and the *Huangren jing*, the tenth-century *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Imperial Digest of the Taiping Xingguo Reign Period) cites lines from the “Sanyi jing” that are elsewhere attributed to the *Huangren jing*.⁵⁶

Thus, we may affirm that the common source for the *Baopuzi* and the *Wufuxu* on matters relating to guarding the One was a text belonging to the Sanhuang transmission lineage that circulated under the title *Huangren jing* or, very likely, that of *Sanyi jing*.⁵⁷ This text, which survives in part in the “Sanyi jing,” was the principal reference on visualisation methods involving internalised manifestations of Taiyi and the corollary production of an inner embryo or Infant through cosmogonic reversion. It was also one of the earliest, predating the *Wufu xu* and the *Baopuzi*, as well as the Shangqing revelations.

Other Shangqing methods that conjugate visualising Taiyi along three Cinnabar Fields and generating an inner embryo are inspired from the antecedent meditations, with which they share numerous ritual elements or sequences. The meditation on the Three Ones from the *Dongzhen taishang suling dongyuan dayou miaojing* 洞真太上素靈洞元大有妙經 (Scripture of the [Celestial Palace] of the Immaculate Numen; DZ 1314) is regularly cited as an exemplar of Shangqing meditations on the inner embryo. However, it contains numerous elements from the Sanhuang method and, to a lesser extent, from

56 The *Sanyi jing* passage from *Taiping yulan*, 661.3a, corresponds to lines from a section that the *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 3.17b–18a, ascribes to the *Tian huang[ren] zhenyi jing*. Additional corroboration is supplied in the *Shangqing dao leishi xiang* 上清道類事相 (True Appearances of the Categories of the Supreme Clarity Dao; DZ 1132), 1.3a; the seventh-century text reproduces a few lines from the *Wufu xu*'s DZ 388, 3.18a, treatment of Taiyi meditation, but it refers to a *Huangren shou sanyi jing* 皇人守三一經 (Scripture of the August Person on Guarding the Three Ones) as its source; see also *Shangqing dao leishi xiang*, 1.4b, in the same passage; it corresponds to *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 3.18a, but it cites the *Wufu xu* instead of the *Huangren shou sanyi jing*.

57 Or variations thereof, including *Huangren (shou) zhenyi jing* or *Huangren (shou) sanyi jing*. See Robinet 1984, vol. 1, 27, 29–32; and Raz 2004, 175, and 177. The *Daozang quejing mulu* 道藏闕經目錄 (Catalogue of Missing Books in the Taoist Canon; DZ 1430) lists a *Huangren shouyi jing*, 2.3a; a *Huangren sanyi tu jue* 皇人三一圖訣 (Instructions on the Chart of August Person for [Guarding] the Three Ones), 2.5a; and a *Huangren shou Huangdi sanyi shengxuan tujue* 皇人守黃帝三一昇玄圖訣 (Instructions on the Chart for Ascent to the Mysterious through the August Person's [Method] of Guarding the Yellow Emperor's Three Ones), 2.14b), as lost; Robinet 1984, 28, n.1, believes these works to be fragments of, or elaborations on the *Huangren jing*.

the *Laozi zhongjing*.⁵⁸ Despite clear evidence of borrowing from earlier traditions, Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536) asserts that the *Dongzhen taishang suling dongyuan dayou miaojing* “is the original source on the method of Guarding the One.”⁵⁹

The Shangqing corpus also contains a handful of embryologies. The meditations for untying embryonic knots (*jiejie* 結節), more ominously known as the “knots of death,” are one example.⁶⁰ The knots naturally occur during gestation, serving the primary purpose of holding together the five viscera. At the same time, by gradually strangling the flow of vital essences and *qi* throughout the body, they are also eventually responsible for death. Depending on the text, practitioners either regenerate an embryonic version of themselves devoid of knots or, more commonly, they reverse their gestational development to untie them. These practices involve inner gods, the combination of multiple sets of cosmological symbols (usually the Five Agents and three Cinnabar Fields), as well as cosmogonic reversions through which adepts relive, or more accurately, re-actualise their own embryonic development. Yet, despite being touted as original Shangqing embryologies, preliminary analysis suggests that even the Shangqing embryologies that appear in the context of methods for untying these congenital knots may have some relation to the Sanhuang corpus.

Typically, three texts are identified as stem sources on the topic of embryonic knots.⁶¹ One of them, the *Ciyi wulao baojing* 雌一五老寶經 (Precious Scripture on the Female One and the Five Elders; DZ 1313, seventh century), presents techniques only for destroying the knots: there is no mention of generating an embryo, so we need not concern ourselves with this text here.⁶² A second among the three, is the *Taiyi dijun taidan yinshu xuanjing* (Secret Scripture of

58 *Suling dongyuan dayou miaojing* DZ 1314, 31b–32a; in an interesting conflation, the method relates that the Infant (Ying'er) resides in the Lower Cinnabar Field and the Red Child (Chizi) in the Upper Cinnabar Field. However, contrary to the Sanhuang and *Laozi zhongjing* precursors, the Shangqing meditation does not accord much importance to transformative and thus embryological processes; see also 27a–29b, in the section titled “Taishang dadong shouyi neijing fa 太上大洞守一內經法” (“Methods of the Great Canon’s Esoteric Scripture for Guarding the One”) for more overlap with the Sanhuang visualisation on the Three Ones; see also Robinet 1993, 120–138, and especially 124–137.

59 是守一之宗本矣; *Dengzhen yinjue* 登真隱訣 (Secret Instructions for the Ascent as a Perfected; DZ 421), 1.3a; see also 1.4b.

60 See Robinet 1984, vol. 1, 141, and vol. 2, 158, 172–73, and 271; and Pregadio 2006, 142.

61 Robinet 1984, vol.1, 141.

62 *Dongzhen gaoshang yudi dadong ciyi yujian wulao baojing* DZ 1313, 47a–53b.

the Great Elixir) mentioned above. We have already noted how its embryological section is almost identical to the Sanhuang meditation. The method for untying knots appears to be original, but its closing segment highlights Dijun and Taiyi as operative inner gods – a distinctive feature of the Sanhuang visualisation.⁶³ Another section on Taiyi, Dijun, and the Three Sovereigns is also associated with the Sanhuang corpus, suggesting that this text is largely based on pre-Shangqing Jiangnan 江南 sources.⁶⁴

The last text related to embryonic knots, the *Shangqing jiudan shang hua taijing zhongji jing* 上清九丹上化胎精中記 (Scripture of the Record of the Centre on Embryonic Essence of the Superior Transformations of the Shangqing Ninefold Elixir; DZ 1382, fourth century) contains methods for undoing them. Additionally, it presents a technique through which the adept autogestates by receiving the *qi* of the Nine Heavens over nine months, thereby generating a perfect embryo with knot-free viscera.⁶⁵ This method is often cited as a Shangqing precursor to Neidan, but it notably differs in that the union of Yin and Yang principles (Xuanmu 玄母, the Mysterious Mother, and Yuanfu 元父, the Original Father) and their products, an Infant and a phoenix, manifest in the heart rather than in the Lower Cinnabar Field. This agrees with the general observation that embryologies of Shangqing design tend to be grounded in Five Agents symbolism and to be primarily spiritual in scope.⁶⁶ At

63 See *Taidan yinshu* DZ 1330, 38b–46b; the section on untying the congenital knots corresponds to the *Taidan yinshu jie bao shier jiejie tujue* 太丹隱書解胞十二結節圖訣 (Illustrated Instructions for Untying the Twelve Embryonic Knots according to the Concealed Writ of the Great Cinnabar [Palace]; DZ 1384).

64 *Taidan yinshu* DZ 1330, 13b–14b; cf. *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, 44.6b–7b; this passage stands out in that it identifies the Three Sovereigns as Huangjun 皇君 (the Sovereign Lord), Tianhuang 天皇 (the Celestial Sovereign), and Huanglao 皇老 (the Sovereign Elder); see also the pre-Shangqing *Dongzhen taiwei huangshu jiu tian balu zhenwen* 洞真太微黃書九天八籙真文 (True Writs of the Eight Registers of the Nine Heavens from the Yellow Book of the Taiwei Heaven; DZ 257), 1a.

65 *Shangqing jiudan shang hua taijing zhongji jing* DZ 1382, 16b–26b; the passage is described by Robinet 1993, 140–143; this text is also briefly discussed in Stephen Bokenkamp, “Simple Twists of Fate: The Daoist Body and Its *Ming*,” in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, Christopher Lupke, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 160–162; cf. the *Shangqing taishang dijun jiu zhen zhongjing* 上清太上帝君九真中經 (Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected; DZ 1376); it presents a method for generating an embryo that is virtually identical to that contained in the aforementioned *Shangqing jiudan shang hua taijing zhongji jing*; the former has been studied by Robinet 1984, vol. 2, 67–76, and more recently, by Bokenkamp 2005, 157–160.

66 See, for instance, the “Taishang Laojun neiguan 太上老君內觀” (“Lord Lao’s Inner Contemplation”) in *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, 17ab, in which the Five Agents, via the gods of the five

any rate, the conceptual bridge uniting Shangqing and Neidan has been, in some studies, hastily erected. More pointedly, the exact relationship between the practices of untying congenital knots and their associated embryologies on one hand and earlier pre-Shangqing sources on the other remains to be fully elucidated.

The visualisation practices documented in the first- or second-century *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注 (Xiang'er Commentary to the Laozi) should also be addressed, albeit briefly.⁶⁷ Their scheme, inspired from Five Agents cosmology and redolent of earlier self-cultivation practices, is primarily focused on the heart. Moreover, the theme of cosmogonic reversion is ambiguously present, at best.⁶⁸ Similarly, contemplation methods from the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Great Peace Scripture) give predominance to the heart and enlist the cosmological imagery of the Five Agents.⁶⁹ Consequently, neither of these can be considered as precursors to Neidan techniques.

Therefore, it is the “Sanyi jing,” the *Laozi zhongjing*, the *Wufu xu*, and the *Huangting neijing* that form the bedrock on which the edifice of Neidan embryological discourse was erected. The first three especially are closely interconnected products of the same environment.⁷⁰ Isabelle Robinet asserts that the *Laozi zhongjing* forms a textual bridge between the *Wufu xu* and the

viscera, are given precedence over other cosmological emblems. A sample of primarily “spiritual” embryologies from a handful of sources – Shangqing and other – can be consulted in *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, chapter (*juan*) 29, titled “Bing sheng shou ming 稟生受命” (“Obtaining Life and Receiving Fate”).

- 67 On the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu*, see Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaozheng* 「老子想爾注」校證 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991); my discussion omits the parallel topic of embryology with respect to the generation of “seed people” (*zhongmin* 種民) in Celestial Master and other forms of early medieval Taoism; the subject is thoroughly and insightfully discussed in Christine Mollier’s “Conceiving the Embryo of Immortality: ‘Seed-People’ and Sexual Rites in Early Taoism,” in the present volume.
- 68 The *Xiang'er* explicitly discounts meditations on a “One” that resides inside the body as spurious; see Rao Zongyi 1991, 12; the passage is translated in Bokenkamp 1997, 89 and discussed in Pregadio 2006, 128.
- 69 See the article by Grégoire Espeset, “Prenatal Infancy Regained: Great Peace (*Taiping*) Views on Procreation and Life Cycles,” in the present volume.
- 70 On the topic of the intellectual and social environment in which the *Laozi zhongjing* was compiled and its relation to some of the sources mentioned above, see Katō Chie 1996; Lagerwey, “Deux écrits taoïstes anciens,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 14 (2004); Pregadio 2006; Schipper 1995; and Schipper 1979; see also Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 100–112.

Sanhuang wen – the chief scripture of the Sanhuang lineage.⁷¹ Less is known about the circumstances in which the *Huangting neijing* was compiled, but it likely emerged from the same southern esoteric milieu as its three sister texts during the same period, about 100 to 150 years before the Shangqing revelations of 364–370.

Still, the materials tied to the *Huangren (sanyi) jing* are among the closest to Neidan. The meditation from the “Sanyi jing” translated above describes how Taiyi is to be visualised in three different contemplations as descending from its residence in the Upper Cinnabar Field, from whence it initially manifests or “enters” the body, moving down to the heart, and then further down to the Lower Cinnabar Field. The crucial visualisation process that would later typify Neidan practice is equally composed of the three steps that are, embryologically speaking, interchangeable with conception, gestation, and birth. These are: 1) uniting male and female principles usually in the Lower Cinnabar Field after identifying and activating them; 2) refining the product of their union – typically, in the heart; and finally 3) moving the refined product up to the head, from where it either “emerges” (egress of the spirit; *chushen* 出神) or suffuses the adept as a perfected version of the self. This scheme notably serves as the anchoring for Neidan’s three-step approach to self-cultivation (refining essence [*jing*] into *qi*, *qi* into spirit, and reverting spirit to vacuity; see Fig. 3.3).⁷² This is the same sequence, albeit in reverse order, that is described in the Sanhuang meditation.

Another operative difference is that the Sanhuang meditation concentrates the embryological components in one locus – conception, gestation, and birth, which take place *inside* the body, all occur in the Lower Cinnabar Field. The focus is markedly on the *dantian*. In Neidan, although the centre of the Lower

71 Robinet 1984, vol.1, 27–29; *Wufu xu* DZ 388, 1.18b–21b, and 26b, correspond to *Yunji qiqian* DZ 1032, 19.4b–5b; 19.8a; 18.10b–11a; 18.21b; 19.9a–10a; Lagerwey 2004, 7 and 11–12, n. 45, lists the passages that are shared by the *Laozi zhongjing* and the *Wufu xu*. Chapters 11 and 18 of the *Baopuzi* display a number of similarities with chapters 2 and 3 of the *Wufu xu*; see Robinet 1984, 27, n. 4, for specific references; and Schipper 1979, 75–76, for concordances between the *Baopuzi* and the *Laozi zhongjing*.

72 “Refining essence and transforming it into *qi*” (*lian jing hua qi* 煉精化氣), consists of circulating essence through the *renmai* 任脈 and *dumai* 督脈 channels along the back and the front of the body, and moving it up to heart; 2) “Refining *qi* and transforming it into spirit” (*lian qi hua shen* 煉氣化神) involves nourishing *qi* in the Middle Cinnabar Field and moving it to the Upper Cinnabar Field, where it becomes spirit; 3) “Refining spirit and reverting it into vacuity” (*lian shen huan xu* 煉神還虛) concerns spreading spirit from the Upper Cinnabar Field so that it permeates the adept, who dissolves into the pre-cosmic, undifferentiated Dao.

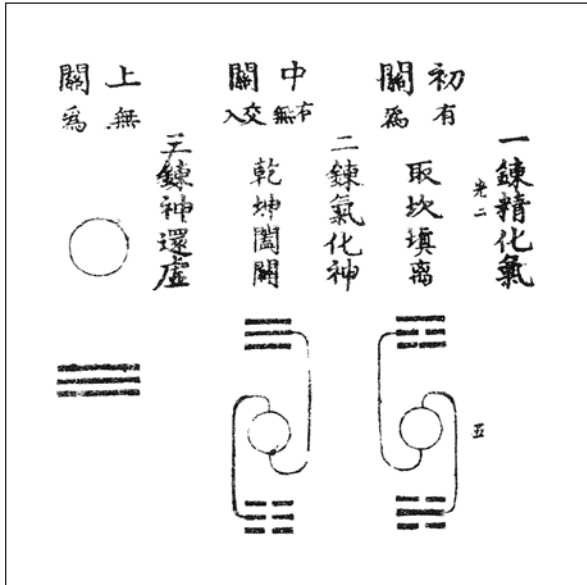


FIGURE 3.3 *The three phases of Neidan practice for the generation of external medicine (waiyao 外藥) culminating in the “return to the void” (huanxu 還虛); from the Zhonghe ji 中和集 (Anthology of Central Harmony; DZ 246).*

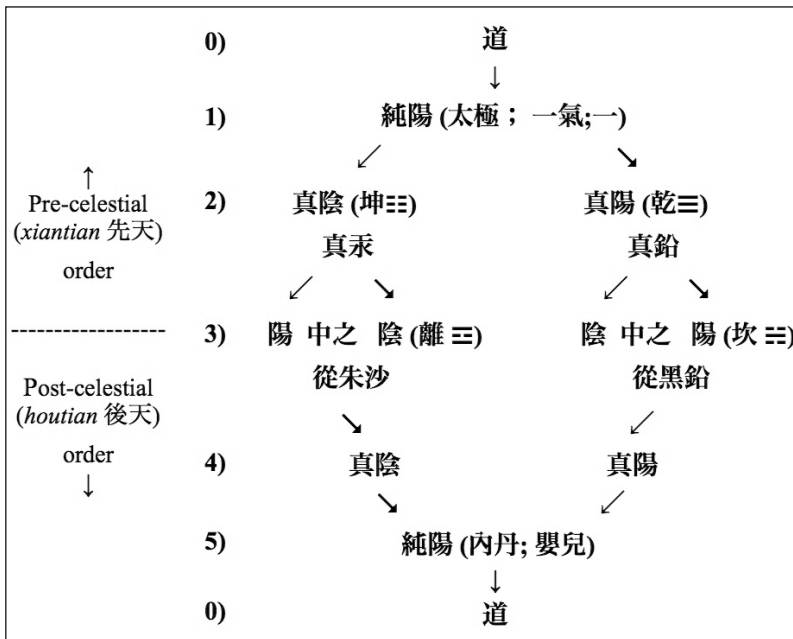


FIGURE 3.4 *Cosmogony (1 to 3) and its inversion (3 to 5), to be completed in Neidan meditation. AUTHOR’S INTERPRETATION.*

Cinnabar Field is crucial in the conception and partial gestation of the Elixir, the focus is more diffuse. The second phase of gestation takes place in the heart, and the *external* birth is accomplished from the Upper Cinnabar Field, quite literally, with a perfected self breaking open the cranium and emerging from what is left of the sinciput.⁷³

In Neidan, this threefold sequence can also be expressed in different, perhaps more technical terms that highlight the transformative process (see Fig. 3.4). Upon comparing Figures 3.1 and 3.4, it becomes apparent that this process is essentially identical to that of the Sanhuang method. Both Neidan and Sanhuang contemplations depart from an undifferentiated state – Taiyi or primordial *qi* (*yuanqi* 元氣) in one case and Pure Yang (*chunyang* 純陽) or unitary *qi* (*yiqi* 一氣) in the other. A division then occurs into two binary “female” and “male” constituent elements: Taiyi (mother) and Dijun 帝君 (father) for the Sanhuang visualisation and True Yin (*zhenyin* 真陰; Kun 坤 ☷) / true mercury (*zhengong* 真汞) and True Yang (*zhenyang* 真陽; Qian 乾 ☰) / true lead (*zhenqian* 真鉛) in the pre-celestial order (*xiantian* 先天) for Neidan.

At this point in the Sanhuang practice, essence from the womb (Taiyi; female principle) is combined with essence from the embryo (Dijun; male principle) to complete the womb (Taiyi; female principle). Likewise, the *hun* 魂 and *po* 魄 souls, which are products of the spirit of the embryo (Dijun; male principle), are combined with *qi* from the womb (Taiyi; female principle) to form the embryo (Dijun; male principle). Thus, in order to reconstitute a true or perfected male or female principle, it is necessary to borrow an element from the opposite principle. The same operation is undertaken in Neidan: in the post-celestial order (*houtian* 後天), adepts extract the Yang from within Yin (*yin zhong zhi yang* 陰中之陽; kan 坎 ☵), that is, they extract the Yang from “black” or native lead (*heiqian* 黑鉛), to reconstitute True Yang. Yin is extracted from within Yang (*yang zhong zhi yin* 陽中之陰; li 離 ☲), in other words, from cinnabar (*zhusha* 朱沙), in order to reconstitute True Yin. In a final step, both the extracted True Yin and True Yang are recombined to return to the pre-celestial Pure Yang – the Elixir or the embryo – in a post-celestial order. In the Sanhuang meditation, this last stage of the sequence consists of combining the perfected womb (female principle or Yin) with the perfected embryo (male principle or Yang) to generate the Infant, who is none other than Lord Lao (Laojun 老君), the Primordial Lord Taiyi (Taiyi yuanjun). Through this twofold dynamic of division and (re)absorption, the origin and end of the cosmos, the

73 On *chushen* 出神 (“egress of the spirit”) see also Catherine Despeux, “Symbolic Pregnancy and the Sexual Identity of Taoist Adepts,” in this volume.

solve et coagula as Robinet describes it, are re-enacted and actuated within the adept.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In Neidan, there are multiple ways of representing the Elixir. One of the images that recurs in numerous sources is that of the Infant or inner embryo. Accordingly, the process of generating, refining, and activating the Elixir can be vividly described in embryological terms. The following passage from the *Zhouyi cantong qi*, although well known, is worth reproducing:

Similar in kind to a hen's egg,
 The white [Yang] and the black [Yin] tallying with one another,
 One inch in size,
 Form is the beginning,
 The four limbs, the five viscera,
 The sinews and bones join it.
 When the ten months have elapsed,
 It leaves its womb,
 Its bones, weak and pliant
 Its flesh, smooth like lead.⁷⁵

類如雞子，白黑相扶，縱橫一寸，形為始初，四肢五臟，
 筋骨乃俱，彌歷十月，脫出其胞，骨弱可捲，肉滑若鉛。

In a skilful intertwining of semantic registers, this verse weaves together the literal narrative of intra-uterine physiological development with the figurative narrative of an embryological soteriology. The interplay is so complete that the passage was and remains hotly debated: some commentators and scholars have seen in it a description of the genesis of the Elixir, whereas others insist that the lines were originally intended as a literal (cosmogonic) account of

74 Robinet 1993, 123.

75 *Zhouyi cantong qi* DZ 999) verse 56, 2.18b–19b; slightly modified from Pregadio 2011, 101–102. The line on weak bones is a partial quotation of section 55 from the *Laozi*; see Pregadio 2011, 195–196, for notes on the *Cantong qi* passage; Despeux's "Symbolic Pregnancy," in this volume, also discusses the passage; for other sections from the *Cantong qi* with pronounced embryological or reproductive imagery, see, among others, verse 23 and the "Song of the Tripod," translated in Pregadio 2011, 79 and 120–121, respectively.

gestation upon which an alchemical reading was later imposed.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, by the time Neidan had grown into a fully articulated system of practice, the distinction didn't matter at all to practitioners. Men, it was thought, could also literally be pregnant. And although they generated an embryo through methods of contemplation, the fruit of their efforts, they believed, was physically manifested and just as real as an actual embryo.⁷⁷

Therefore, the question that was posed at the outset of this article – whether the production of the Elixir in Neidan was understood to entail the generation of an actual embryo – is, in retrospect, beside the point. Embryological discourse, by virtue of equating the body with the cosmos, was already inbuilt into the earliest self-cultivation traditions that were the genealogical precursors of Internal Alchemy. Neidan simply elaborated on those seed notions that were already there. Moreover, the evolution of embryology from rhetorical trope to blueprint for fully articulated soteriologies relied precisely on that ambiguity between literal and figurative registers. In early and medieval China, there was no contradiction between an actual pregnancy and a spiritual or symbolic pregnancy because both were made of the same cosmological stuff. Both belonged to the same, essentially correlative style of reasoning that framed understandings of the body cosmologically. Descriptive accounts of gestational processes were simultaneously cosmogonies and instructions on how to generate a perfected self. There was no distinction in early and medieval China between medical embryological discourse and its soteriological counterpart. Both were expressed in the exact same cosmological idiom.⁷⁸

More specifically, as far as visualisation practices were concerned, the equivalence between embryological development and spiritual refinement was made possible and reinforced by three developments: A) the anthropomorphisation of cosmic principles within the body; B) the combination of

76 Pregadio 2011, 195–196.

77 Catherine Despeux, “Symbolic Pregnancy”; on male uteruses and lactating men, see chapter 6 of Charlotte Furth's *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 187–223; for a counterpoint to the view that the embryo in Neidan manifested physically, see Wang Mu's 王沐 citation of Wu Shouyang 伍守陽 (1573–1644?) in his *Foundations of Internal Alchemy: The Taoist Practice of Neidan* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), 107.

78 Similarly, Nathan Sivin, “The Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy,” in *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 5: *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, part IV: *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Apparatus, Theories and Gifts*, Joseph Needham, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 210–211, has argued that even in Waidan (External Alchemy), the intricate descriptions of chemical reactions and interactions could be used for the purpose of ecstatic contemplation just as for the compounding of actual elixirs.

multiple cosmological models; and C) the use of cosmogonic reversion as a template for practice. By facilitating the interplay between literal and figurative semantic registers, it is these developments, and their coalescence in meditation practices, that laid the foundation upon which Neidan was erected.

The closest and most direct predecessors to Internal Alchemy were not Waidan or sexual rites as is commonly held, nor were they Shangqing meditations on inner gods. Rather, the constellation of texts tied to the lost *Huangren jing* and the systematically overlooked Sanhuang lineage were the most conceptually immediate forebears of Neidan. More detailed future studies on the position of the *Laozi zhongjing* in the Sanhuang corpus, for instance, a scripture of crucial importance in the formation of Neidan doctrine, would undoubtedly help to bring these genealogical ties to light. Another potentially fruitful avenue of research concerns the parallels between the notion of the One in Neidan and that of Taiyi (the Great One) in Sanhuang, and even Shangqing meditations. For now, it suffices to underline that in all of three contexts, cosmogony begins with a unity that gives birth to multiplicity: the generative and transformative powers of Taiyi as an inner god correspond to the cosmic functions of the One in Neidan. Moreover, in all three contexts, the transformative processes that double as spiritual path culminate in a return to this singularity. Taiyi, the embryo, the Infant, and the Elixir all refer to an ontological state of unity that cosmogonically follows immediately after the Dao. Regardless of what specific terms are employed to denote this unity, it is that which adepts strive to attain in their practices – a communion with the very *materia prima* of the cosmos.

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