

Female Alchemy

An Introduction

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Female alchemy (*nüdan* 女丹) developed within the milieu of internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), with which it shares technical terminology and practical processes. However, compared to the historical development of *neidan*, *nüdan* is a rather late tradition, as the first individual texts appear in the late Ming and the first full-fledged manuals are from the late eighteenth century. *Neidan* and *nüdan* not only share similar language and contents, but they are also produced within the same network of Qing authors and practitioners as *neidan*.

While the intellectual milieu within which *nüdan* arises and its language are similar to those of *neidan*, the *raison-d'être* of *nüdan* has different origins from that of *neidan*, partly because of the different historical period in which it emerges, and partly because of the gender specificity of this tradition. Thus *nüdan* has a historical origin firmly based within the milieu of the Qing period. Its emergence is closely linked to contemporaneous social and cultural developments, especially as it pertains to the role of women. A society increasingly interested in restricting female social behavior is behind the very emergence of an alchemical tradition for women, previously felt unnecessary, which proposes a practice to conduct safely at home. This social and historical pressure is also evident in the large amount of space devoted to moral injunctions for women in *nüdan* texts.

Nüdan authors and editors insist in their prefaces on the importance of this tradition because of the intrinsic physiological difference of women as well as because of their different, and much reduced, access to teachers and written materials. However, women had been practicing alchemy, albeit in numbers less numerous than men, from the beginning of *neidan*; physiological differences between male and female practitioners had always been present, and occasionally a different practice for women was discussed in Daoist texts from the Song dynasty onwards. However, it is only in the Qing period that physio-

logical differences and, I will argue, renewed focus on morals, coupled with the widespread diffusion of internal alchemical knowledge, combine to produce a full-fledged tradition separate from *neidan*, which is then categorised as a practice for males. Anxiety about the public religious activities of elite women also concurs to the development of a safer practice to conduct at home.

The texts insist on the different physiological structure of men and women, with specific attention to the female reproductive system, and especially to the role of the breasts, of the uterus, and of blood, in its many guises as energetic base, menstrual flow and breast-milk. Based on this physiological difference, while in the standard *neidan* practice three-stage sequence *jing* is refined into *qi* and *qi* refined into *shen*, in female alchemy the first step is different: the practice starts from refining blood (*xue*) into *qi*. The first step is described as being much more complicated than that of male practice since in females blood is a powerful element capable of major physiological disruptions and often responsible for serious illnesses. Both the breasts and the uterus are important elements of the initial refinement of blood into *qi*, which happens through a series of breast massages, abdominal massages, breathing exercises and internal visualizations.

Historical and Social Background

Niudan emerged in the seventeenth century and developed into a full-fledged tradition by the eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, the first texts to mention gender-specific practices for women are earlier, and are found in the *Daozang*. These texts, though, only peripherally point to separate practices for women and there is no evidence, dating from this time, of an alchemical literature just for the use of women.¹

¹ The *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑 (A Comprehensive Mirror on Successive Generations of Perfected Transcendents Who Embody the Dao; DZ 296) by Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (fl. 1294-1307), contains hagiographic accounts of Daoist women, mostly from the Song dynasty; *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* juan 55:2a. In the *Chongyang zhenren jinguan yusuo jue* 重陽真人金關玉鎖訣 (Formulas of the Golden Pass and Jade Lock of the Perfected Chongyang; DZ 1156), by Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112-1170) there are several mentions to female practice, e.g., 10b, 16a, 20a. The *Daoshu* 道樞 (The Pivot of the Dao; DZ 1017), a twelfth century anthology of earlier texts of internal alchemy, also includes a mention of female practice (*Chongzhen pian* 1a). The *Chunyang dijun shenhua miaotong ji* 純陽帝君神化妙通紀 (Annals of the Wondrous Communications and Divine Transformations of the Sovereign Lord Chunyang; DZ 305), is a collection of legends on Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓. Episode 106 tells of a 16-year old girl who, to escape her parents plan to marry her, hides away on a mountain. Here she meets an old man who tells her: "I will slay your Red Dragon." Another important example is a Song commentary to the *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Awakening to Perfection) by Xue Shi 薛式 (d. 1191) (in DZ 142), which mentions breast

More extensive practices are described in two texts from the late Ming, written by the medical authors Cao Heng 曹珩 (fl. 1632) and Fu Shan 傅山 (1607-1684). Cao Heng, in 1632, wrote the *Nügong quebing* 女功卻病 (Women's Practices for Repelling Illness). This is a section in the *Baosheng biyao* 保生秘要 (Essential Secrets for Conserving Life), the second part of the longer treatise *Daoyuan yiqi* 道原一氣 (Unitary Qi of the Dao's Origin, ed. 1636), a work that brings together medicine and internal alchemy. Fu Shan, on the other hand, received the *Duan honglong* 斷紅龍 (Beheading the Red Dragon) as an appendix to a collection of texts transmitted by the immortal Lü Dongbin. The collection is called *Shangcheng xiudao bishu sizhong* 上乘修道秘書四種 (Four Secret Volumes on the Unsurpassable Refining of the Dao; *Daozang jinghua* 12.2). Both larger works by these medical authors combine medical treatments and alchemical techniques for men and women. In the two short *nüdan* texts, descriptions of the important loci in the female alchemical body as well as of specific practices for women are given, even though many details of the process are not clarified. The *Duan honglong* says:

The perfected man [Lü] said:

All those who practice refinement for female perfection, must first . . . sit until the *qi* in the body circulates freely. One day before the menstruation, at the hours of *zi* and *wu* [midnight and noon], start the practice. At midnight, put on your robe and sit with legs crossed, hands holding firmly to the sides of the ribs.

After [the *qi*] has ascended and descended within the body a few times, press the left heel against the vagina and the rectum, clench the teeth, close the eyes, shrug the shoulders, and lift up with great strength. Imagine the *qi* in two red channels rising from the womb, passing through the Three Passes, and ascending to the Niwan.² From here it descends to the root of the tongue and pours into the breasts.

Practice like this continuously until the body is warm, then stop. Use a white silk kerchief and insert it into the vagina to compare the quantity [of blood] to last month's and to see if there is any. Again, like before, [use] the circulation [of *qi*] to scatter blood and *qi* in order to avoid illnesses. In less than a hundred days [the flow] will cease. (2b)

massages and bodily refinement. For a discussion, see Valussi 2003, 70-76.

² The Three Passes are the Tail Gate (*weiliu*) at the coccyx, Narrow Strait (*jiaji*) at the upper spine, and Jade Pillow (*yuzhen*) at the base of the skull. They are gateways for the circulation of *qi* during the small circulation or Microcosmic Orbit (*xiao zhoutian* 小周天). Once the *qi* has ascended through the Passes, it reaches the Niwan, the upper cinnabar or elixir field. From there, it descends through the front of the body, reaches the coccyx and rises through the spine again. This circulation process is repeated several times and its aim is the refinement of the *qi*. In this passage, the difference from standard *neidan* and *qigong* circulation practices is the definition of the womb and of the breasts as loci of refinement.

This passage is the first written evidence of a coherent approach to female alchemical practice.

In the Qing, several important alchemical authors mention *nüdan* practices in their *neidan* texts and collections. In the eighteenth century, we have examples in Liu Yiming's and Min Yide's works, both Longmen patriarchs, and in Fu Jinquan's work, a Daoist practitioner and local religious leader in Sichuan.

Liu Yiming 劉一明, a Gansu Longmen patriarch of the eleventh generation, was active in the northwest, throughout Shanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia.³ One of his most famous works, the *Xiuzhen biannan* 修真辯難 (Discriminating Difficult Points in the Cultivation of Perfection) was published in 1798. It purports to record a conversation between Liu and a disciple that took place in 1782, recorded in question and answer format.⁴ It includes a section of five questions that discuss female alchemy in simple, direct terms. The main questions seem to revolve around "difference." How are the male and female body differentiated and why? How does this difference affect the practice and the final result? Is this difference contingent or of a higher nature?

The answers are clear and direct. Male and female bodies have physiological differences, therefore it is natural that the practice should follow a different path at first. Soon, though, their bodies are more and more similar and their practice also becomes the same. Liu stresses that, from the perspective of the Dao, males and females have no difference:

93. It was asked: Dao does not differentiate between men and women. Why do they have differences [in practice]?

He responded: As for their Dao, it is the same; as for their use, it is different. Then, they are not the same in their inherent nature, and their body and structure have differences. Therefore, they share the way of inner nature and destiny, but in the use of the practice are greatly dissimilar. (34b-36a)

Liu also mentions female alchemy in another of his writings, the *Huixin ji* 會心集 (Collection of Meetings of Minds; dat. 1801), which contains the long poem *Nüdan fa* 女丹法 (Methods for Female Alchemy), written in sixty 7-character verses (*Waiji* 2.6a-7a; ZW 8:691-92). This poem, too, describes the *nüdan* practice clearly and with authority.

Min Yide 閔一德, a Jiangnan Longmen patriarch of the 11th generation, is the author of the *Gushu yinlou cangshu* 古書隱樓藏書 (Texts Stored in the Hid-

³ Information on his life appears in various sources, but according to the *Jinxiian zhi* 金縣志 (Gazetteer for Jin County, ch. 13) he was born in Shanxi, in the town of Quwo 曲沃. His other names were Wuyuanzi 悟元子, Supuzi 素朴子, and Beihe sanren 被褐散人.

⁴ In *Daoshu shier zhong* 道書十二种 (Twelve Books on the Dao), by Liu Yiming, 1819: ji 7. Reprinted in 1990 from an 1880 edition (Beijing: Zhongguo zhongyi yao chubanshe). Also in *Zangwai daoshu* 8:467-92 (abbreviated ZW).

den Pavilion of Ancient Books; dat. 1834) in 28 *juan* (ed. Wuxing: Jingai Chunyang gong). It contains the *Niwan Li zushi nüsong shuangxiu baofa* 泥丸李祖師女宗雙修寶筏 (Precious Raft on Paired Cultivation of Women by Master Li Niwan) and the *Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize* 西王母女正途十則 (Xiwangmu's Ten Precepts on the Proper Female Path), which were transmitted to Min in 1799 by Xiwang mu 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West. Unlike those in Liu Yiming's collections, these texts are received through spirit-writing and include sections on female proper behavior.

They all tend to describe female practice in matter-of-fact terms, discussing the differences and similarities between male and female bodies and practices and applying a terminology reminiscent of late-Ming medical texts. Their presence in larger *nüdan* collections by well respected Daoist authors attests to the fact that *nüdan* had been incorporated as a part of the mainstream alchemical discourse and that it was a well-established tradition by this time.

The first full-fledged collection of *nüdan* materials is the *Nü jindan fayao* 女金丹法要 (Essential Methods for the Female Golden Elixir; ZW 11:512-41), collated in 1813 by the Daoist author and local religious leader Fu Jinquan 傅金銓. Born in Jinxi 金谿 (Jiangxi), he traveled extensively through south China before settling down in Baxian 巴縣 (Sichuan) in 1817, where he "opened an altar for transmission and to receive texts through spirit-writing." The *Nü jindan fayao*, as other materials in his collected works—the *Jiyizi zhengdao bishu shiqi zhong* 濟一子證道秘書十七種 (Jiyizi's Seventeen Secret Books on the Verification of the Dao)—was received in this manner. Fu starts its preface by justifying his work as necessary for all women seriously interested in internal alchemy. He says:

Since early times perfected women have been many, but their methods of refinement have not been recorded in books. In this era few have heard of them. Women practice for three years, while men need nine years [to reach perfection]. Even though as a daily practice it is quite easy, finding a master is very difficult. Men can go and seek a fortune [and a master with affinity] for a thousand *li*, but for women, leaving the inner chamber by just half a step is very difficult. There are thousands of chapters of alchemical treatises, but they do not list or include female practice. So I have put together this book. (1a)

Fu thus links the need for writing this book to women's difficulty of finding proper manuals and guidance, since they cannot leave the inner quarters and seek masters as easily as men. This statement is repeated in different ways in many other prefaces to *nüdan* works; it is a proof of the growing unease with female religious activities outside the home. However, the lack of specific instructions for women is not the only reason for printing collections: almost half of the text is devoted to moral and behavioral instructions, to be implemented before the beginning of the alchemical practice.

Another important collection from the very end of the Qing dynasty is the *Nüdan bebian* 女丹合編 (Combined Collection on Female Alchemy), collated by the Daoist intellectual He Longxiang 賀龍驤 in 1906 at the Erxian an 二仙庵 (Hermitage of the Two Immortals) in Chengdu. This collection is the culmination of the *nüdan* tradition in the Qing; it is the largest, most organized, most comprehensive, and clearest of all (see Valussi 2008).

From the first texts in the late Ming to the *Nüdan bebian* in the late Qing, we thus see a tremendous development of the *nüdan* tradition. In the course of 300 years, *nüdan* discourse went from a short mention in a medical or alchemical text through larger sections in alchemical works to full fledged manuals.

Why, then, was there such a production of alchemical manuals for women in the Qing? The emergence of *nüdan* is linked to several different and parallel developments. One is the widespread diffusion of Longmen Daoist teachings, of which alchemy is a part, to all levels of society. Another is the growth of the printing industry, which allowed this knowledge to spread more widely. This diffusion of knowledge often happened within the realm of spirit-writing cults, and almost all *nüdan* materials have their origin in spirit writing séances. A third development is the increased focus on morality, joined by the diffusion of morality books and ledgers of merit and demerit.

Daoist Resurgence

At the beginning of the Qing, the resurgence of Daoist practice was closely linked to the spreading of the Longmen school (see Mori 2004; Esposito 2000; 2001; 2002). The active proselytising of Wang Changyue 王常月 (d. 1680), seventh Longmen patriarch and abbot of the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Temple) in Beijing, opened the gates of the temples and offered initiation to almost anyone willing to enter. The Longmen community found their center of influence and conversion in the southeastern provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Many of Wang's disciples established ordination platforms and settled their temples on mountains in this area, and Longmen branches began to sprout. By the Qianlong (1736-1796) and Jiaqing (1796-1821) eras, Longmen schools had branched out not only in the southeast, but also other areas of China. As a result, knowledge that had been closely guarded in Daoist lineages, and which included *neidan* teachings, became more widely available. One of the areas where this is evident is vernacular literature, a literary genre that developed in this period. Many scholars of literature have noted the appearance of Daoist and alchemical elements in late Ming and Qing novels (e.g., Liu 1962; 1970);⁵

⁵ Examples of Daoist elements in novels include characters and features in the *Jinping mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase; Roy 2001, 505n.20) and *Xiyou ji* 西游記 (Journey to the West; Liu 1985; Despeux 1985; Yu 1987). Recently Wang Guogang (1990), Wang

this is a testimony of the spreading of these ideas, if not actually practices, to the wider public.

Printing

The spread of printing as well as an increased differentiation of published materials led to an increased access to writings by a wide range of people. In the case of religious materials, this meant that alchemical treatises could be diffused widely among the population; that this indeed happened is evident from the mention of alchemical methods in numerous literary sources (Dean 1998, 55). The cheap printing and wide local distribution of religious materials, moreover, contributed to the localization of religious knowledge. Small printing houses as well as local religious organizations flourished.

This development could not have been so successful without another one: the increasing number of alchemical writers active in the Qing. Often people who had failed the examination or low-level bureaucrats, they did not fit into the government machine and devoted themselves to the development of local religious traditions.⁶ The parallel development of local religious groups and the emergence of small printing houses fostered the production and diffusion of religious knowledge at the local level. A good example of this development was Fu Jinquan, a local religious leader who received spirit-written materials from immortals like Lü Dongbin at an altar. Part of a family of publishers, he issued the works through his company, the Shancheng tang 善成堂 (Hall of Achieving Goodness), originally founded by his older relative Fu Jinduo 傅金鐸 near Chengdu. Besides forming a religious community, Fu spent the last part of his life printing the texts he received, edited, and authored, including alchemical treatises and *nüdan* texts.

Morality

Due to increased social mobility, the inability of the examination system to absorb all literati into official employment, and the social dislocation and turmoil connected with the Ming-Qing transition, there was an increasing focus on morality. This is obvious not only from the increased publication of morality books, but also from the transformation of the ledgers of merit and demerit into more sanctioning books (see Brokaw 1991; Theiss 2004).

The increased focus on morality is evident especially in *nüdan* collections from the mid-Qing. These manuals not only describe female practice as different from male, as was the case in late-Ming texts, but they also encompass large

Gang (1995), and Jennifer Oldstone-Moore (1998) have shown how the entire novel can be seen as the journey of an adept through alchemical practice.

⁶ On the Qing bureaucratic crisis, see Dean 1998: 51: "The examination system was unable to absorb increasing numbers of candidates into the civil service. A growing population of literate men and women had to look elsewhere for employment, entertainment, and enlightenment." See also Dean 1998, 20, 54.

sections that describe the correct moral behavior of women. This characteristic appears to a different degree in all female alchemical texts from the mid to late Qing. The *Nüdan shize* 女丹十則 (Ten Rules on Female Alchemy) includes a section on female behavior which stresses the need to be filial, respect the in-laws, and maintain purity, chastity and modesty in private and public venues. Some of the precepts address specific issues of meditation and alchemical practice, but even in these cases the suggestions are of modesty and purity as well as silence, seriousness, cleanliness, and determination:

You have to have a firm determination in collecting your heart-mind. In general, when you enter the way of refinement, you need to embrace it with your whole body, even [be prepared to] devote several lifetimes to it. You ought not to lose your strong heart-mind and firm will. If there are mistakes, assess them in advance. (12ab)

Some ideas expressed here reflect those found in morality books for women, such as, for example, the *Neixun* 內訓 (Instructions for the Inner Chambers), a work by Empress Mingren written in the early Ming (1404) which enjoyed great distribution in the Qing, because it was included in Wang Xiang's *Nü sishu* 女四書 (Four Books for Women). Another book whose ideas are reflected in female alchemical treatises is Lü Kun's 呂坤 (1536-1618) *Guifan* 閨範 (Standards of the Women's Quarters).

In the Qing, the activities of women outside the home were monitored closely, and their religious practices increasingly criticised (see Dudbridge 1991; 1992; Prazniak 1986). The growing desire of women to seek instruction in religious practice produced anxieties which fostered the emergence and swift development of the *nüdan* tradition. In the prefaces, the editors justified the compilation of *nüdan* texts as a response to the specific needs of women in relation to their spiritual journeys. These needs, though, had to be pursued from within the inner chambers and with practices that did not endanger their morality and social standing. Several prefaces to *nüdan* collections described the threats that unsafe religious practices posed to women, and to the *status quo* in general. He Longxiang, in the preface to the *Nüdan hebian*, says:

There are those women who, even though their mouths are pure, their hearts are like wolves and tigers; they look at their parents in law and sisters in law like rivals and enemies.

There are those who mistakenly take part in heterodox sects and do not know the correct way. . . . others are lured into lewd chambers.

There are those who secretly attract good girls to serve as human cauldrons, as they serve as the Yellow Dame [*huangpo* 黃婆]⁷, and as a result lose their name and integrity.

⁷ In partner practice, this term refers to a woman who, during essential phases of the alchemical process, helps the practitioners unite or procures female adepts for male adepts.

Then there are those good women who do what palace ladies like to do: they enjoy serving as cauldrons [*dīng* 鼎]⁸ in order to seek the achievement of immortality, [but they just] continue to lose their good name and integrity.

And there are those who go on pilgrimages, enter temples and throw themselves in a disorderly manner at Buddhist and Daoist monks; others again plant the seed of passion into male teachers of good schools. And, of course, there are those who merely use the Dao to collect riches (pref. 2b-3a).

Why was there the need for such a tradition after centuries of non-gendered alchemical treatises (and probably non-gendered practice)? Even though most if not all of those who could afford alchemical practice had always been men, *neidan* texts did not, until the emergence of *nüdan* in the Qing, clearly differentiate practitioners according to gender. By stating this difference, and acknowledging that what had been written before that time was therefore mainly directed to men, writers of female alchemy formed and at the same time satisfied the need for a tradition of female alchemy. Non-gendered in principle, in practice internal alchemy had been, since its full development in the Song, primarily a male domain. By the late eighteenth century, women had begun to be mentioned, but mostly as "cauldrons" in male practices, or as colleagues in duo cultivation (see Liu 1997).

With the increasing availability of written texts in most households, the spread of literacy to women of higher classes, and women's increasingly active involvement in religious activities, there was certainly a more fertile ground for the creation and diffusion of religious literature for women. This tradition was thus not only a response to women's needs and demands or an assertion of their presence in the religious arena, but also a reaction to the worries that these demands produced within the established elite. The prefaces to the various *nüdan* collections, written by the men who collected them, show that their aim was to set the basis for a safe, controllable, and manageable female practice. This would not take women away from home or expose them to improper influences, a growing concern especially in Qing China's reactionary attitudes towards women.

The women targeted by this literature were mainly of the elite. They had at least rudimentary reading skills, leisure time and space to practice, alone or together with other women. Their status would have been tainted by intermingling with male teachers or fellow practitioners as well as by travelling outside

⁸ In sexual practice, this term is an euphemism for the body of a young girl, used as the cauldron for the transformation of the essences that the male deposits there and, later, plucks from it for his own refinement.

the home.⁹ In terms of age, while this practice was open to adult women of all ages, the practice of menopausal women plays a strong role, which indicates that they often started practicing after completing their familial duties. However, many texts also mention that one should start the practice at the onset of the first menstruation. This would have produced tension and the need for intense mediation inside the family. At this point, there is no historical evidence that this was a practice used within nunneries or communities of marriage resistance which did exist in south China.¹⁰ More research is required.

A Rhetoric of Difference

The perceived structural and social differences between men and women led to a new practice for women, complete with indications of correct social behavior and moral injunctions. The authors of these texts prescribed a theory for a “different” female practice and then proceeded to create texts to describe it. Directed to one gender, *nüdan* relates the theory and practice of alchemy closely to the structure of that gender and thereby defines, for the first time in such an overt manner, practices used in a gendered context. The theoretical and cosmological difference between male and female structures formed the base of the creation of a gender-specific tradition, which allows for a different practice. Once one structure was selected over another theoretically, the need “naturally” arose to create a complete textual tradition. In this way, *neidan* became suddenly a dual tradition, including *nandan* 男丹 and *nüdan*. The term *nandan* only appears in texts of *nüdan*, as a way to assert this tradition against its opposite, the other “pole” in the sudden polarization of *neidan*. Here is how one alchemical author describes the gender difference:

The great Dao does not ask about men and women. Both of them can obtain accomplishment [of the practice]. Therefore, the way of the men is to become a Perfected Man, the way of the woman is to become a Primordial Princess [*yuanjun* 元君].

From time immemorial, alchemical treatises discussing the work of male refinement have been numerous. But they do not discuss the female way of refinement. If there are those who discuss it, they do not go beyond an approximate exposition. They do not cover women. They stretch their meaning by saying that if people have the same inner nature and life-force, they then will follow the same practice. They speak of male practice but they do not go into trouble explaining female practice. They do not know that the man is yang outside and yin inside and

⁹ This can be inferred by reading the prefaces to *nüdan* collections, and by the very little information gathered about actual practitioners. He Longxiang, in the preface to his *Nüdan hebian*, mentions his female relatives as his primary inspirators for its collation (6ab).

¹⁰ These communities made large use of precious scroll (*baojuan*) literature, but not, as far as I know, of *nüdan* literature. See Prazniak 1986; Sankar 1978; Topley 1954; Wolf 1975.

the woman is yin outside and yang inside. Their inner nature is different, their structure and form are not the same. Even though they have the same inner nature and destiny, the way they practice is greatly different.

The *Xingzhen biannan* says: "As for men starting the practice, refining their *qi* is fundamental; as for women starting the practice, refining the form is fundamental."

Xuzu says: "When men have completed the practice, they will not leak *jing*. When women have completed the practice, they will not leak menses [blood]." The way they return to the first pass [the first step of the practice] is very different for them. When it comes to refining the self, obtaining the pill, returning to the cinnabar, warming and nurturing, forming the embryo, letting the spirit go out and the like, even if [female practice] is the same as male, there are still slight differences in the order. (*Nü jindan fayao*, preface)

Social Differences

One justification for the emergence of *nüdan* literature stems not from structural but social differences. Closely echoed by the preface to the *Nü jindan fayao*, the preface to the *Nüdan hebian* notes:

There are Heaven and Earth and then there are men and women. Of men, many attain immortality; of women, few attain immortality. Why? Because men can wander and look for the Dao, whereas for women it is difficult to leave home and find a master. Alchemical books for men are very numerous, but alchemical books for women are few and far between, and are not transmitted. Seven or eight men out of ten can read and understand a written text, but only one or two out of a hundred women can. (1a)

Both prefaces show a revealing insistence on the same set of themes: texts for women are lacking, and thus only few women who want to practice can do so. Being always confined in the inner quarters, they cannot meet teachers and have no discernment between good and bad teachers, right and wrong practices. In this situation, the writers say, what could be better than a practice with which, without leaving home, the young girl can transform her *qi*, the old lady can ward off illnesses, and the widow can maintain her chastity (*Kunyuan jing*, 2nd pref., 4a).

Because of their different social standing, it is difficult for women to act in the same way as men when seeking the Dao. Their education is not comparable to that of men, therefore it is difficult for them to read alchemical treatises. If that were not enough of an obstacle, leaving home to seek a master is unthinkable for a woman of good social standing. Therefore, it is said, this newly created literature will be welcome in the inner quarters, because it is written in a simple language. It will satisfy the spiritual needs of women without exposing them to the threats of the outside world. This justification is clearly linked to the anxiety perceived by the elite about women's religious activities.

Structural Differences

The issue of structural differences is prominent in He Longxiang's preface to the *Nüdan bebian*. It includes the most complete description of cosmological, physiological, and practical differences between men and women within the *nüdan* tradition. The differences are divided according to three categories: innate nature (*bingxing* 秉性), structure (*xingti* 形體), and practice (*gongfa* 功法).

The categories are telling. Innate nature includes distinctions at the cosmic and fundamental level: yin and yang, yielding and unyielding, stillness and motion, the trigrams Kan and Li, the moon and the sun, impurity and purity. Structure means distinguishing bodily features, sexual attributes, fluids like blood and semen, different kinds of energy. Practice involves differences in training that result from the cosmic and structural differences. While being all-encompassing, this description is not as detailed as some of the passages within the manual itself, especially when discussing the practice.

As regards differences in innate nature, He says:

Just as the man is yang, and yang is clear, so the woman is yin, and yin is turbid. Male nature is hard, female nature is soft. A man's feelings are excitable, a woman's feelings are tranquil; male thoughts are mixed, female thoughts are plain.

The man is fundamentally in movement, and movement facilitates the loss of *qi*; the woman is fundamentally quiet, and quietude facilitates the accumulation of *qi*. The man is associated with the trigram Li and, like the sun, he can complete a whole circuit of the heavens in one year. The woman is associated with the trigram Kan and, like the moon, she can complete a whole circuit of the heavens in one month. For a man, *qi* is difficult to subdue; for a woman, *qi* is easy to subdue. These are the differences concerning innate nature. (4ab)

Women are physiologically turbid and impure, but by nature they are also soft, tranquil, quiet, and of plain thought. Men are physiologically pure, but also hard, excitable, with mixed thoughts, and in constant movement. These differences influence the way in which they practice and the results of the practice. While a woman has to be more conscious of her turbid nature, her quietness helps her in the accumulation of *qi*. A man starts with a pure nature, but his constant movement means easy loss of *qi*. Men and women derive their innate characteristics from two different areas of the cosmos: male is Qian (Heaven) and female is Kun (Earth). This concept is not new. We find it already in the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), from which *nüdan* borrows heavily.

One step further, the male structure is likened to that of the trigram Li (fire), yang outside and yin inside, while the female structure matches that of the trigram Kan (water), yin outside and yang inside. This cosmic difference, in turn, causes differences in terms of the shape and form of male and female bodies (*xingti* 形體), their fluids and energies. Consequently, men and women follow different paths.

Kan is a powerful image: the yin outside, transposed onto the female body, is what needs to be refined, drained of its coldness and dampness, made to turn to yang. The yang inside, on the other hand, facilitates the females last stage, when the yang spirit, emerging from her interior, will not be obstructed on its way out. The cosmic differences between yin and yang, Kan and Li, Qian and Kun, are not just parallel to the description of men and women, but affect their bodily shapes and their practice. Because of their constitution women have to work intensely on their outer structure, cosmologically symbolized by the external yin lines of Kan and physiologically materialized in menstrual blood. In a parallel way, the male structure, outwardly yang, is not difficult to transform.

He's preface next discusses structural differences:

The man has a knot inside the windpipe [Adams apple], the woman does not. The male breasts do not produce liquids and are small; the female breasts produce liquids and are big. A man's foundation is convex [*tu* 凸]; a woman's foundation is concave [*ao* 凹]. In the man [the convex organ] is called the Essence Chamber [*jingshi* 精室]; in the woman [the concave organ] is called the Infant's Palace [*zongong* 子宮]. In men the vital force is located in the Ocean of *Qi*; in women the vital force is located between the breasts.

In the man, generative power [lit. "kidneys"] is located in the pelvis; in the woman, generative power originates from the blood. In the man [the generative power] is the essence, its color is white and its name is White Tiger [*baihu* 白虎]; in the woman it is the blood, its color is red and its name is Red Dragon [*chilong* 赤龍]. As for male essence, it is yin within yang; as for female blood, it is yang within yin. The power of male essence is more than sufficient; the power of female blood is insufficient. These are differences concerning form and structure. (4b-5a)

This section discusses both general physiological structure and specific differences. It mentions the breasts almost at the beginning: a fundamental element of female practice, they are the means through which the blood is refined and have no part in male practice. The author describes the female and male defining the fundamental organs very literally as convex and concave and emphasizing the Essence Chamber in males and the infant's palace in females. The essence chamber is where the male stores his seminal essence, it is located in the lower elixir field and its outward manifestation is the penis. The Infant's Palace is where the blood is stored in women, its outward manifestation is the vagina and in physiological terms it corresponds to the uterus. The female *qi* center is located between the breasts, where the blood gathers once it is produced by the heart and then flows down to the uterus and out of the body as menstrual blood. It ought to return here in the backwards trajectory of alchemical practice. While in men the seminal essence to be sublimated is called the White Tiger, in women the blood to be sublimated is called the Red Dragon. The reference to yin within yang for male essence and yang within yin

for female blood is the physiological application of the trigrams Li and Kan described above.

Moving along, the following section presents differences in actual practice. They involve not only different loci where the practice takes place, but also different perspectives and processes:

A man first refines the founding origin [*benyuan* 本元], and only subsequently the form [*xingzhi* 形質]; a woman, instead, needs to refine her form first and only then the founding origin. The male yang leaks downward, whereas the female yang moves upward. When a man has completed the practice, and the seminal essence does not drip away any more, this is called "subduing the White Tiger." When a woman has completed the practice and the menstrual flow does not drip away any more, this is called "beheading the Red Dragon."

In the man, seminal essence moves against the current and he becomes immortal; in the woman, blood moves upwards, ascending towards the heart cavity. The masculine practice is called "refining the *qi* of the supreme yang", the feminine practice is called "refining the blood of the supreme yin."¹¹ For the man we speak of "embryo" [*tai* 胎]; for the woman, on the other hand, we speak of "breathing" [*xi* 息].¹²

When the man has subdued the White Tiger, the stem [penis] will retract and become similar to that of a young boy; when the woman has beheaded the Red Dragon, the breasts will retract and become similar to those of a male body. The man progresses slowly at the moment of the manifestation of the spirit, and he is slow in achieving the Dao; the woman progresses fast at the moment of the manifestation of the spirit, and she is also fast in attaining the Dao. A man can ascend [to Heaven] on his own; a woman, instead, needs to await salvation. Men must meditate facing the wall;¹³ women who succeed in going back to emptiness are very few. The man will become a Perfected, the woman will become a Primordial Princess. These are the differences concerning the methods of practice. (5ab)

As in general *neidan*, the goal of female practice is to refine one's constitution, reclaiming the energies one received at birth and slowing their loss, thus delaying or eliminating death. But while the standard course of alchemical re-

¹¹ A detailed description of this method, which involves breathing exercises, regular breast massages, visualizing lights throughout the body, forming the immortal embryo, and the final manifestation of the spirit is given in several texts in the *Nüdan hebian*: see *Qiaoyang jing nügong xulian* 1a, *Nü jindan* 2.23a, *Nüdan cuoyao* 2b. The three versions are almost identical. This preface uses information from all of these texts and streamlines them.

¹² A man must focus on visualizing an embryo forming inside his body, while a woman must concentrate on her breathing, since it will not be hard for her to visualize the embryo forming inside her body.

¹³ The practice of "meditating facing a wall" refers to the legend of Bodhidharma, said to have spent nine years at the Shaolin Temple (Henan) meditating facing a wall, after cutting his own eyelids to avoid falling asleep.

finement proceeds from *jing* to *qi*, from *qi* to *shen*, and from *shen* to emptiness, women need to refine their blood, not their essence, into *qi*. The physical starting point for female practice is accordingly the *Qi* Cavity [*qixue* 氣穴], a point between the breasts. Through breast massages and visualizations, the blood that has previously descended from the *Qi* Cavity to the Infant's Palace is sent upward in a backwards motion. The Infant's Palace, moreover, is also called the Sea of Blood (*xuehai* 血海) and located three and a half inches below the navel. It is not to be confused with the lower elixir field, where male practice begins.

Unlike a man, a woman needs first and foremost to refine her exterior form, meaning her bloody and turbid constitution and her sexual characteristics (i.e., breasts). This attention to her exterior form directly relates to the structure of the female cosmological and physiological body that is yin and impure in nature. Through breast massages the blood that would flow down from the heart to the womb is thus sent upwards, back to the *Qi* Cavity between the breasts. Practitioners repeat this process many times, thus achieving the thinning and eventual disappearance of the menstrual flow, a process called beheading the Red Dragon. When this happens, other sexual characteristics change: the breasts shrink and the body becomes more androgynous. At this point the woman has completed the first stage of the practice.

For the next stage, that of transforming *qi* into *shen*, she can progress faster than a man because she is now concentrating not on her exterior form but on her internal embryo, and her internal structure is pure yang (like the trigram Kan). At the very last stage, however, that of ascension to Heaven, even though she has transformed all her external sexual characteristics as well as refined an internal immortal embryo, some of her nature still weighs her down and, unlike a man who can ascend directly, she needs to be called up by the immortals. Then she becomes a Primordial Princess.

The Female Body

The representation of the female body found in these texts borrows from brief depictions in Song Daoist materials and in the two Ming texts described earlier. It also relies on medical texts of the time which describe the female constitution as consisting of blood and therefore weaker, damper, more turbid, and harder to cure (Furth 1986; 1994). This notion is transferred to female alchemy in terms of the difficulty for women to complete the first step of the practice. Women have to struggle more than men in the first stage, and their attention must be focused on draining their structure of their excess liquid and dampness. Thus, for a woman, her outer structure is the first thing to focus upon, whereas men can immediately direct their attention to the core of their being, the *benyuan*, foundation and origin of their selves.

Blood is clearly the main element to be dealt with in the process of female refinement. It is related to several loci in the female body: produced by the heart-mind, it concentrates in the *Qi* Cavity at the breasts, then flows down to the Sea of Blood, and through practice reverts upward again to the *Qi* Cavity. Within the female body, blood is not just a fluid but a process. It changes shape and degree of purity, it transforms into milk, it is replenished and exhausted. The *Nüdan cuoyao* 女丹撮要 (Comprehensive Essentials of Women's Alchemy), contained in the *Nüdan hebian*, describes in detail the formation of the female body from the mingling of her parents' energies, the formation of blood and its exhaustion through menstruation.

When a woman is not born yet, her father and mother join their essences. The [spermatic] essence of the father arrives first; the blood of the mother arrives second. Blood containing essence, this is the female form. (3b)

The passage goes on to describe how menstrual blood (called Heavenly Water) forms in the female body over the next fourteen years and how it is then squandered little by little every month until the woman reaches the age of 49. Alchemical practice serves to reverse this situation of depletion:

If one wants to practice until the Qian body is complete, the movement goes upwards from the lower [elixir] field to the Yang Cavity. The spiritual fire will steam up like vapor and transform the flux into yellow, the yellow into white, and the white will change into nothingness. (*Nü jindan* 2.20ab)

The first aim of the practice is therefore to eliminate the menses. This should be accomplished not by stopping them and producing a menstrual blockage, identified in the texts as a disease to be cured, but by the gradual transformation and refinement of blood inside the woman's body in such a way that it does not any more appear in its usual forms outside the body (menstrual blood, milk). An erroneous process would jeopardize the adept's health.

In order to refine the blood, women have to implement a practice completely different from that of men at this stage, which is the massage of the breasts. Massaging the breasts helps revert the downward flow of blood from the *Qi* Cavity to the Sea of Blood. This massage is described in minute detail in several *nüdan* texts. For example:

Intention is focused on the breasts, left and right it revolves thirty-six times in each direction. The lips [are sealed] above and below, the teeth clench firmly, the nostrils are closed tightly. Use internal breathing. With the palms of your hands, massage the breasts 72 times on each side, first softly and then more urgently, first lightly and then more strongly. In a hundred days the work will be completed, and they will acquire the form of walnuts. (*Nügong zhengfa*: 10ab)

With progressive practice, the breasts undergo physical changes, they become smaller and the nipples retract to look like those of a maiden or of a man: practice will result in your breasts becoming like those of a maiden, the form of those of a young girl, then the woman transforms into a male body. (*Xiwangmu nüxin zhengtu shize* 9b)

The practitioner will have to practice this process several times, circling the energy according to the method of the Microcosmic (lesser celestial) Orbit. As the *Nügong lianji buandan tushuo* 女功煉已還丹圖說 (Illustrations and Sayings on the Female Practice of Refining the Self and Reverting the Elixir) says:

Use the [methods of] the lesser celestial orbit and of the phases of fire.¹⁴ Both also have oral instructions. Advance the yang fire and retreat the yin tally [*jìn yanghuo tuì yīnfú* 進陽火退陰符].¹⁵ Smelt and refine it. Both have timings and have regulations. When you have refined it for a month, the number of the small circulations is sufficient.

As for the truth or falsity of the medicine, the coagulation, or the elixir, there is a self-verification: if the small elixir really has been coagulated, every time you enter the room and sit in quiet meditation, fire will exude throughout the body in the same way as vapor comes out of a steaming basket. You only ought to silently guard the Central Palace [*zhonggong* 中宮; i.e. the Sea of Blood]. Do not shout, but listen to its changes; in a moment you will see a pearl of fire, as a bean in size, shooting out of the Hall of Light [*mingtang* 明堂; at the top of the head], more than ten feet high, like a lightning-bolt. This then is the true proof of having set the basis and obtained the medicine. (3-4)

The texts often insist that at this delicate point one needs a teacher to be guided forward and avoid dangers:

At this point there should also be oral instructions. You need to attend a master in order to avoid dangers. If you do not do this, I fear that the true fire will change into common fire; first guard against it burning the body, second guard against becoming mad.

Same Bodies?

Once women have managed to transform their bloody constitution and refine their blood into *qi*, they have achieved the first step of the practice. From then on, the differences between the sexes are minimal, and women can continue

¹⁴ This indicates the track orbit along the two main lines, the Governing and Conception Vessels. The practitioner grasps the true yin and sends it in a circular motion along these, down the front and up the back of her body.

¹⁵ This process, also called "phases of fire" (*huohou* 火候) or celestial orbit (*zhoutian* 周天), is common in *neidan* practices; it refines yin into yang energies through circulation.

their practice similarly to men. Therefore, the detailed description of women's differences in the first phase does not set the stage for a completely female practice, alternative to standard *neidan*. Instead, the beginning of the second phase brings about the deletion of this difference, where the penis retracts and the breasts shrink dramatically (*Nüdan bebian* 5a).

During alchemical practice, both men and women thus lose their secondary sexual characteristics. Does the author then imply that a woman, in order to complete the practice, has to become a man? The answer is that instead of women turning into men, both sexes aim to refine their bodies towards a more androgynous ideal. Cosmologically they strive towards integrating Kan and Li; physiologically they hope to refine those elements that keep them attached to a lower level of humanity, i.e., blood and raw essence. The shrinking of the penis and the loss of menses and disappearance of breasts are secondary effects of this path. The aim of the practice is to go beyond, to a stage where bodily differences do not matter any longer. The changes in the physical body are external indications of the changes happening at a more internal and subtle level. Liu Yiming notes:

Someone asked: Once having attained the Golden Elixir, and after having ingested it, [it is said that] the woman turns into a man and the old into an adolescent. Is this true? [The Master] answered: In that case we are speaking of the principle, and not of the shape. The woman, having attained the Dao, has completely discarded the yin and her body turns into a complete yang body, the same as the body of a man who has achieved the Dao. For this reason it is said that "the woman turns into a man." . . . We are not speaking of a transformation of her illusory image [body]. (*Xinzhēn biannan* 1.10a)

On the other hand, even after this refinement, the female body somehow still retains traces of yin constitution that influence her ability to perform in the same way as the male.

Once the first step of the practice is concluded, once blood is transformed and dampness dried, the fundamental difference of the female body seems to disappear. Women can then practice following standard alchemical instructions, even more quickly than men. Why? Because once the coarser elements of the body (female and male) are refined, both genders are supposed to be at the same level and can proceed as equals.

We can say that, as regards the laws of nature, there are no differences [between men and women]. I advice the female adepts to first find out points of contiguity where there are differences, and only then discover the differences hidden where there is similarity. In most cases, however, the contrasts are to be found before the beheading of the Red Dragon, whereas the major similarities emerge after the beheading of the Dragon. These are irrefutable and eternal arguments. (*Nüdan bebian*, pref. 5ab)

Two ideas seem to be very clear: female difference has a negative connotation and needs to be eliminated for a woman to attain complete refinement; and, once eliminated, nothing else will interfere with her attainment. Men's practice, on the contrary, does not start from a point of deficiency, but is simply a process of refinement from turbid to pure, leading directly to attainment.

There is, though, an obvious contradiction between what is described in the prefaces of female alchemical texts and what we read in the main texts. In fact, the main texts still mention differences in both structure and behavior even after the refinement of the female structure. Once they complete the practice, women still have to wait until the gods come to their rescue, while men can directly ascend to the skies. As the *Nüdan hebian* notes: "A man can ascend [to Heaven] on his own; a woman, instead, needs to await salvation" (5a).

In order to be accepted as "realized people," women have to perform more "good work" in society to cancel lingering structural imbalances. They have to "accumulate good." As the *Nüdan shize* says:

Why is it that in order to complete the practice that leads to feminine perfection, it is necessary to "await salvation"? The reason lies in the [female] constitution, feeble and pervaded with blood. [The woman] who practices inner refinement and sublimation is able to complete a yang body. But even if the formation of the yang body is achieved, her yin and stagnant nature is not yet completely refined. . . .

The situation is different for the male constitution. After a man has practiced until the accomplishment of an adamant and indestructible body, he has completed the stage of return to vacuity and a spiritual light will pervade Heaven and Earth. Therefore a man does not need to await salvation: he will attain the Dao and complete perfection, he will ascend in person to the presence of the supreme divinities and wander to the quiet Penglai islands. For women, it is not like this. In order to complete the alchemical practice for women, it is necessary to widely cultivate merits and virtues. If the merits and virtues have been cultivated fully, then the sages from above will see it and take pity on them, and report it to the emperor. . . .

Once the seeker of feminine perfection reaches this point, once she overcomes the stage of the manifestation of the spirit, she must wait for the salvation of the supreme sages who will lead her back to Authenticity. Only then the practice is completed. (16ab)

There are, thus, two distinct rhetorics at work. One says that once the first step is complete and the bodies refined, male and female practice proceed in the same way. This voice is countered by another that keeps repeating how the female is still different (and weaker).

Conclusion

To conclude, I find that texts of female alchemy reveal much about gender notions, the understanding of the female body, and the social tension between men and women at the time of their writing.

What is interesting about the texts is both how they were created and who they address. I argue that the emergence of female alchemy is a response to a growing need for a safe and morally acceptable practice for women. The elements for the creation of such a tradition were already there: women had been described as practicing differently from men in Daoist texts since the twelfth century while medicine had increasingly focused on the different physiology of males and females. Yet, for reasons described above, a literature just for women only began during the Qing dynasty.

Authors of these texts used already existing medical and alchemical notions about the female body, as well as pre-existing but newly flourishing ideas about the role of women in society, to build a different theory and practice in women's spiritual quest. The literature that ensued had two aims: assuaging fears arising from the heterodox practices that women were already following, and filling the needs of the increasing number of women with a desire to practice. The appearance of this literature, furthermore, made it imperative for women to follow a separate practice from men. It was no longer acceptable for women to follow the same practice as men, since now there was a new literature just for them, which clearly identified the differences.

Reading the prefaces and following the actual practices, though, it becomes clear that the differences highlighted, at the social and structural levels, are perceived as negative. Women are lacking in several ways, and this practice not only helps with their specificity but also restores the female body, rids it of its pollution, and replenishes it. Women's starting point is one of deficiency. This deficiency is overcome when the various differences on the bodily, spiritual, cosmological, and social levels are eliminated. This is not an easy task.

In sum, by reducing the female to a body that has to be cleansed from the turbidity of blood, the writers reveal their fear of pollution. By producing texts to be used in the inner chambers, they do the same thing on a different level, containing the dangers of women from spilling over into the male world. By expecting women to conform to the male practice once they are rid of their turbid constitutions, they invalidate their initial aim of creating a truly "female" alchemy, a practice that takes into account the female body and its specificities, seen as differences, not as deficiencies. By expecting women to perform "good works" at the last stage of the practice, in order to supplement their lacking structure, they reinforce the idea of difference that cannot easily be transcended. However, this literature should not be completely discounted as moralistic and paternalistic; it does afford women the opportunity to practice, and practice

safely, away from criticism and perceived or actual dangers to themselves and the community.

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