

4 The Porosity of the Body

Orifice and Oracle

On a beautiful fall day in 2010, I found myself in the company of a real estate developer in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, whom I shall refer to as Mrs. Wang. She treated me and a group of her friends to a lunch in the restaurant attached to the high-rise building she owned. It was a simple banquet of cold and hot dishes, tea and fruit juice, with a delicious bowl of noodles at the end. After lunch, she invited us all to visit her hometown, a small village about an hour's drive outside the city. The eight of us fitted comfortably into two SUVs, and we soon arrived at the village. The real estate developer's secretary apologized to me as she ran off to a convenience store, explaining that she needed to buy some cigarettes. No one had smoked at lunchtime, and when she came out of the store with an entire carton of expensive Zhonghua-brand cigarettes, I was intrigued.

Further down the unpaved road, we came to a new building, rather unremarkable on the outside, but when we went inside, it turned out to be a small temple to the bodhisattva Guanyin. We did not remain long in the temple, though, and went to sit down in a side room. It turned out that Mrs. Wang had built the temple with her own funds because she was

a spirit medium who since childhood had been possessed by a spirit who lived in her home village. Her parents were strict leftists who were horrified that their daughter had developed this "talent," and she did her best to conceal it. Later in life, when she had become a successful businesswoman, she was able to build a proper temple for the spirit, including the adjoining room where we were now sitting. Here, she could hold consultations. Suddenly, the spirit was present. It possessed her body and began to speak in a local dialect that was unintelligible to me. It also spoke in a deep voice and was a chain smoker. Between sentences, the spirit inhaled vast quantities of smoke, taking only two or three inhalations to devour an entire cigarette. Within half an hour, the pack was empty, and the assistant fumbled quickly to pull the cellophane wrapping off a new one.

Although this story has nothing directly to do with Daoism or ecology, it did put in my mind that the religious experience that I was witnessing could best be interpreted as a transaction. The spirit was inhaling the smoke by possessing Mrs. Wang's body, and presumably without her body it had no way to smoke cigarettes. In return, the spirit made pronouncements for the benefit of those who had come to consult him. People consulted the spirit as a doctor and, having described their ailments to him, the spirit would pronounce a prescription, which would be jotted down by Mrs. Wang's assistant. The prescription would then be taken to the local Chinese medicine pharmacist who would prepare the ingredients according to the spirit's recipe.

The entire routine can be understood as an "official" process in which Mrs. Wang's mouth functioned as a chief conduit for the religious encounter. Through her mouth, smoke entered her body and "fed" the spirit who had possessed her. And through her mouth, the spirit exhaled its esoteric knowledge in the form of the prescription. This official process should also be understood as the conduit for a communal transaction in which the bodies of the living were kept alive through communication with the spirits of the dead. Through the oracular prescriptions uttered through the mouth of Mrs. Wang, the dead brought life to the living.

During this encounter, I could not help wonder about the toll that this process was taking on Mrs. Wang's own health. Again, it seemed that the smoking, though no doubt beneficial for the community in terms of the prescriptions that it produced, would likely inflict harm on Mrs. Wang over the long term. The transaction produced benefits for the community by risking the physical health of Mrs. Wang, the medium of communication. The entire process brought life and death together through orifice

and oracle: the mouth as conduit for the harmful cigarette smoke and health-bringing oracles.

This experience became instructive for my own reflections on Daoist texts, in which the liquid vitality of *qi* serves as the medium of communication between the spirit world and the interior world of the human body, bringing healing and transformation. Earlier, I explained how this form of communication can be understood as a "transaction." In this chapter, I would like to give more concrete examples of what these transactions look like in the context of Daoist religion. I further propose that a network of such transactions constitutes an "ecology of cosmic power," a system in which vital energy is distributed through nodes in the body, the natural landscape, and the cosmos.

An example of such a transaction can be seen in the following excerpt from the *Method of the Nine Perfected* (*Jiuzhen fa* 九真法; fourth century C.E.), a meditation text associated with the medieval Daoist movement known as the Way of Highest Clarity (Shangqing dao).

In the first month, on your fate day, the *ji*azi day and the *ji*axu day at dawn the Five Spirits, the Imperial Lord and Supreme Unity merge together into one great spirit which rests in your heart. His title is the Lord of Celestial Essence, his courtesy title Highest Hero of Soaring Birth, and his appearance is like an infant immediately after birth. On this day at dawn, enter your oratory, clasp your hands together on your knees, keep your breath enclosed and shut your eyes. Look inside and visualize the Lord of Celestial Essence sitting in your heart. He is called a great spirit. Make him spew forth purple *qi* to coil thickly around your heart in nine layers of *qi*. It rushes up into the Mud Pill. Inner and outer [dimensions] are as one. When this is done, clack your teeth nine times, swallow saliva nine times, then recite this prayer:

Great Lord of Celestial Essence,
Highest Hero of Soaring Birth,
Imperial Lord, transform inside me,
Come and visit my heart.

Your body is wrapped in vermilion garb,
Your head is covered with a crimson cap.
On your left you wear the [talisman of the] dragon script;
On your right you carry the [talisman of the] tiger writing.

Harmonize my essence with the threefold path;
Unite my spirit with the [realm of] Upper Prime.
To the Five Numinous [directions] I offer a talisman,
With the Imperial [Lord] may I be wholly identical.

May your mouth spit out purple blossom
To nourish my heart and concentrate my spirit;
As my crimson organ spontaneously becomes alive,
May I become a soaring immortal.¹

An outstanding feature of this method of meditation is the function of the mouth as the means through which the liquid vitality of *qi* is transmitted from the god to the adept. In the first place, the adept is instructed to visualize the god sitting in the heart, spewing forth purple *qi*. The Chinese text literally says "shi dashen kou chu zi *qi*" 使大神口出紫氣, "make the great spirit's mouth emit purple *qi*." As the spirit sits inside the adept's heart, it emits a purple-colored breath that emanates from the spirit's mouth and coils around the heart nine times, enveloping it in a protective layer. The function of this official emission is to nourish the adept's heart, regenerating it and transforming the adept.

At the end of this visualization process, the adept is instructed to recite the prayer, but before doing so he or she should clack the teeth together nine times and swallow saliva nine times. Swallowing saliva is in fact a standard Daoist practice that may help to activate the *qi* flowing through the body. Saliva is considered a basic form of liquid vitality, one that is self-produced in the mouth and to be ingested by swallowing. Here, the production of saliva marks the transition between the visual meditation and the recitation of the prayer, in which the adept expresses the fervent desire that the god's "mouth spit out purple blossom" ("kou tu zi hua" 口吐紫華). The "spitting" of the purple blossom is the method through which the god transfers vital power to the internal organs of the adept.

The *Method of the Nine Perfected* contains nine such visual meditations together with their accompanying prayers. In each case, a god spits a certain color of *qi* and regenerates a different organ of the body, with the ultimate goal that the body of the adept will gain power over the spirit world and pass through death without suffering the decay of the body.²

The significance of this visualization is that it clearly establishes the mouth as orifice through which transactions of cosmic power are mediated. In this case, the mouth of the god produces health-bringing purple *qi* (unlike the chain-smoking spirit featured in the anecdote), and the mouth of the adept produces saliva in preparation for the recitation of prayer. It is hard to say whether this prayer was to be spoken out loud or recited silently to oneself. But assuming that it may have been recited aloud by some devotees, it again constitutes another instance of orality in this tradition: the lips and mouth form the sounds that communicate the adept's deepest desires to the god. The mouth is the space in which the saliva is produced and swallowed. From the lips of the god the liquid purple vitality is passed directly to that of the adept in a kind of "mouth-to-organ" resuscitation.

There is clearly an element of deep intimacy in this transfer of *qi*. The god, dwelling in the heart of the adept, emits his vital fluids and brings renewed vitality not in the form of a pregnancy but in the form of a regenerated life for the adept. It is as though the adept becomes pregnant with herself, engendering a renovated body that has the capacity to survive the trauma of death and become a "soaring immortal."

There is, throughout the Daoist tradition, a minor but persistent engagement with themes relating to sexuality, and in particular the "arts of the bedchamber" (*jangzhongshu* 房中術). In general, though, the attitude of Daoists toward these traditions has been to deprecate them in favor of a more spiritualized understanding of the transactions of liquid vitality. That is to say, the sexual arts are clearly related to Daoist practice but considered a very inferior form of energetic transaction. An example of this attitude of deprecation can be seen in the criticism made by the Daoist scholar Ge Hong (283–343) in his text *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱朴子). In this book, Ge Hong evaluates the methods that people have used to achieve the goal of immortality. Fabrizio Pregadio presents Ge Hong's arguments regarding sexual energetics practice in the context of a general discussion of the arts of nourishing life (*yangsheng* 養生): "Among the arts of Yin and Yang (i.e., the sexual practices), the best ones can heal the lesser illnesses, and the next ones can prevent one from becoming depleted. Since their principles have inherent bounds . . . how could they confer divine immortality, ward off calamities, and lead one to happiness?"³ In this case, Ge Hong is clear that sexual practices are insufficient to achieve the religious goal of immortality. They may

have some minor efficacy in healing certain illnesses but are not at all what the proper student of immortality should be concerned with. He then corrects what he sees as a common misinterpretation of the legend of the Yellow Emperor, who ascended to heaven accompanied by twelve hundred women. He writes:

The common people hear that the Yellow Emperor rose to heaven with 1,200 women, and say that he obtained longevity only thanks to this. They do not know that the Yellow Emperor compounded the Nine Elixirs on Lake Ding at the foot of Mount Jing, and then rose to heaven by riding a dragon. He might have had 1,200 women, but it was not for this reason that he was able to do it [i.e., become a transcendent].⁴

As Pregadio goes on to note, in Ge Hong's view the only practices that enable communication with the gods and the ascension to immortality are those of alchemy and meditation.⁵ The point, however, is that Ge Hong felt obliged to distinguish what he considered properly effective practices aimed at producing immortality from those lesser practices that may be causing confusion in the mind of the people. Since Ge Hong has to take pains to refute the notion that the transfer of sexual energies can produce transcendence and immortality, this notion was already in the mind of the people.

Ge Hong's separation of the more spiritual goal of transcendence from the more material goal of healing continued the process of differentiating Daoism from popular traditions and cultural practices. As the tradition developed, the laboratory alchemy tradition developed by Ge Hong was itself spiritualized and interiorized into a tradition of inner alchemy. The Highest Clarity tradition that emerged after Ge Hong's death marks a transition point in which Daoist elites began to focus on the interior visualization of gods and the significance of somatic meditation techniques for the effective realization of spiritual goals. As Isabelle Robinet writes:

Shangqing [Highest Clarity] formed an important link in the evolution from operative or laboratory alchemy to inner alchemy. It caused transformation of physical sexual practices into platonic love relationships with the gods, diminished the bureaucratic, formal, and theurgical spirit of the Celestial Masters in its ritual, and

transmuted the ideal of quasi-physical immortality into one of spiritual salvation.⁶

The tradition began with a series of pronouncements by various "perfected ones" (*zhenren* 真人), spirit beings living in the Heaven of Highest Clarity, through the medium Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–386). Significantly, these pronouncements were originally produced as written sacred scriptures, not as oral communications that were subsequently transcribed.

In the Shangqing revelations, the orality of the communications process, evident in its most "vulgar" or "common" form in the widespread Chinese tradition of spirit mediums (such as Mrs. Wang), takes place completely in the interiority of Yang Xi's body and then is expressed in stylized form through the medium of the ink brush. Although these revelations are noted for the importance they pay to the written texts, the documents that seal the bond between heaven and earth, it is important to remember that the process of transmission through which they originally occurred should be understood nevertheless as an oracular process taking place in the interiority of the body of the spirit medium Yang Xi. This oral tradition is expressed in Highest Clarity scriptures such as the *Method of the Nine Perfected* through the continuing emphasis on the intimate transmission of liquid vitality between the gods and the adept. This transmission does not occur in a verbal way, but it is nonetheless an oral, orificial, oracular process, but one that takes place internally, that is to say, through the internal orifices of the body by means of which the liquid vitality of the gods circulates within the adept.

A second clue as to the relationship of Highest Clarity texts to the liquid vitality of the cosmos lies in the Highest Clarity theory about the origin of these texts. The revelation of the Shangqing scriptures continued, and extended, the notion that texts of Chinese characters somehow disclose—and facilitate—the real interaction between humans and their cosmic environment. The texts of the revelation were said to have preexisted in heaven, and, indeed, "predate" time itself. The Chinese term for scriptures (*jing* 經) is also used for the warp of a piece of fabric, and thus the scriptures can be understood as a thread running through the fabric of the cosmos. Similarly, the talismans contained within the scriptures (*fu* 符) were understood as distillations or coagulations of primal liquid vitality (*qi*). Put together, the Highest Clarity texts were regarded as the media for the transformation of the physical body into a cosmically transfigured one. The characters of the texts, then, were understood not only

as transcripts of heavenly communications, but even as the symbols that permit such communications. Without the texts, the gods would not be able to speak.

The texts of the Shangqing revelation were therefore understood to be clues or icons that interpreted the infinity of cosmic potential to the privileged possessor or reciter of the scripture. In this way, the scriptures constitute a hermeneutic of power in which the texts, the earthly traces of cosmic signification, mediate the universal Dao—not a thing but a creative act of signification—and concrete human actuality. This mediation is in fact a reciprocal fiduciary relationship that is summed up as follows: "It is by leaning upon the Tao that the ching [jing] have been constituted; it is by leaning upon the ching that the Tao manifests itself. Tao is substance and the ching are function."⁷

Robinet has pointed out that the Highest Clarity texts revealed by the immortal Lady Wei to the medium Yang Xi "are only the material aspect of texts that were formed from the primordial breath that existed before the origin of the world."⁸ The term "material aspect" suggests that the texts are the manifestation of some transcendent substance, which does not precisely capture the meaning of the Chinese terms *ti* 體 (body) and *yong* 用 (functioning). The Chinese philosophical terms in the earlier quotation indicate that the flourishing or activation of the primordial breath cannot in principle be distinguished from that which it infuses. This is, in the end, a process in which the liquid vitality of ultimate cosmic breath is distilled in the liquid ink with which the Chinese characters and talismanic writings were produced. There is a reciprocity to the terms *ti* and *yong* that implies an interactive relationship between the sacred text (the ink on the page) and the cosmic breath from which it originated. This reciprocity is evident in the dual aspects of the text as a seal (*yin* 印) between humans and deities, that is, particular constellations of cosmic power. As humans recite the texts, which are the coagulated traces of the originals in the heavens, deities were said to echo in response. Likewise, sacred treasures (*bao* 寶) are said to be hierogamic unions of divine-earthly shamanic couples; sacred talismans (*fu*) are written in a double or mirror script or in two colors.⁹

In the Highest Clarity system, therefore, human beings are given an extraordinarily privileged role in the evolution of the cosmos. Their sacred texts are active symbols that mediate this creative power. As such, they do not entail a hermeneutic of intellectual comprehension so much as a hermeneutic of the embodied power manifested through the liquids

of ink and *qi*. The chief requirement for Highest Clarity adepts, therefore, is to be initiated into the texts and to learn how to use them. Thus, the "body" (*ti*) of the text lies in its use (*yong*): what it truly is, is how it is truly used. Ultimately, then, the "hermeneutical" relationship an adept has with a text is not one of intellect or meaning, but of power and effect entailed through the liquid transmission of cosmic breath to the ink on the page, and the liquid vitality of the gods circulating in the bodies of the adepts. The revelation of the Shangqing texts, therefore, presents the possibility of human-cosmic transformation.

This transformation of human beings within the context of the cosmic frame that defines the horizons of meaning for them can be understood as the cultivation of Dao (*xindao*). Cultivation is fundamentally an ecological process in that it depends upon the relationship between human beings and their contexts in order to take place. It eschews the radical bifurcation of subjects and objects in favor of a process that takes place within a context. This context is not, as in traditional Confucian readings of Chinese religion, a patriarchal lineage of power and productivity, but rather an environmental context: the space that constitutes the existential location of the practitioner. The implication of this for the contemporary context is that through cultivation it is possible to push beyond the meanings offered by the ideology of modernity in which humans have come to understand themselves as atomized subjects whose meaning is chiefly constituted by their capacity to consume.

Conjunction and Correlation

The Chinese traditions of genealogical lineage and authority imply that the liquid vitality of the cosmos is transmitted genetically, or spermatically, through the patriarchal reproduction of power in Chinese society. Such was the notion of the Shang and Zhou kings who imagined their power to rule (*de* 德) as being transmitted from their ancestors to them and then on to their offspring through the liquids of sexual reproduction.¹⁰

The Highest Clarity tradition, however, clearly distinguishes itself from such a genealogical concept of the transmission of power, or virtue. While it also emphasizes the liquid nature of power, cosmic breath, and vitality, it construes the transmission of this cosmic power ecologically rather than genealogically. What this means is that the transmission of liquid

vitality occurs through the cosmic disposition of the adept, and not because of his or her ancestral lineage. Unlike the popular Chinese (and Confucian) traditions that emphasize the continuous streaming of vitality from ancestors to descendants through the male line, the Highest Clarity revelations point to a higher disposition of liquid vitality through the correlation of the body of the adept with the natural cycles of the heavens, the positions of the stars, and the rotation of the seasons. That is to say, it is the spatial or environmental disposition of the adept that secures his or her religious transformation and not the power of deceased ancestors. The liquid vitality of the cosmos is transacted in moments of correlation, conjugation, and conjunction between the adept and nature.

This process of conjunction can be understood more clearly in the way that the Way of Highest Clarity specified the importance of times and dates in the performance of visual meditations such as the one detailed previously, from the *Method of the Nine Perfected*. This method, contained within the scripture known as the *Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected*, a key text of the Way of Highest Clarity, is accompanied by a second, similar method, the "Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao" ("Badao miyan" 八道秘言). These texts are translated and studied in my previous book, *The Way of Highest Clarity*.¹¹ The interpretation that follows builds on the one that I presented there but emphasizes an ecocritical dimension to these Daoist practices.

Both cultivation methods can be understood from within the broad framework of "visualization practices." The Chinese term for this, one especially prevalent in the Highest Clarity scriptures, is *cun* 存, whose more common meaning is "to exist." In modern Chinese, it is commonly paired with the character *zai* 在 (to be in a place) to mean "to exist" or "to be present." In the Highest Clarity texts, *cun* means "to visualize" in the sense of "to cause something to be present." In particular, it means to cause the gods to be present within the body through an act of internal vision (*neishi* 内视) or internal observation (*neiguan* 内观). The important thing to note, however, is that Daoist adepts cannot simply will visions of the gods into existence by dint of their own mental efforts. Rather, the process of visualization must pay close attention to the cosmological context, in particular the times of the year and the directions in which the meditation takes place.

In the case of the *Method of the Nine Perfected*, each of the nine stages of the visualization process must take place on a particular date specified according to the sixty-day cycle of the Chinese calendar. On those specific

dates, certain gods are to be visualized in certain organs of the body. The key information that the text contains, therefore, is which gods are to be visualized in which organs of the body on which dates. The text, therefore, functions like a combination lock in which the various cycles of the body, the gods, and the calendar are brought into alignment. When this conjunction of cycles occurs, the transformative energy of the god is released and the body of the adept is mystically transformed. In the case of the text previously cited, the purple *qi* coils around the adept's heart and a process of unitive fusion occurs, described in the text as "inner and outer are as one" ("nei wai ru yi" 内外如一).

In previous readings of this text, I emphasized what I termed the "reciprocal" nature of this fusion. That is to say, it seemed to me that the process of biospiritual transformation that the text aimed to produce was neither the product of the Daoist adepts themselves, nor the product of the gods: it was, rather, a reciprocal process in which the individual and the gods came together to produce a religious transformation. It seems to me now, however, that a more accurate way to describe the framework in which the transformation occurs is that of a cosmic ecology. It is a cosmic framework in that it involves a range of dimensions that together function to provide the context of meaning for the life of the adept. These dimensions include the internal physiology of the individual, the calendrical cycle as dictated by the rotation of the sun and planets, the gods themselves, who were thought to descend from the Heaven of Highest Clarity, and also the text of the prayer and the talismans offered to the gods (the distillations of primal *qi* "coagulated" in the precious ink transmitted from master to disciple). This framework should also be understood, however, as an ecological framework, because all these various dimensions function as interlocking cycles of liquid vitality (*qi*). The organs of the body are not simply the physical material of the heart or lungs, but rather the energy cycles that they regulate, the circulation of liquid vitality within the body. The dates of the calendar, moreover, are abstractions derived from the cycling of the sun around the earth, the stars in the heavens, the planets, and the moon. These heavenly objects can also be understood as systems of energy transformation in which liquid vitality transforms through a predictable yinyang cycle, waxing and waning on daily (sun), monthly (moon), and sixty-year phases (as determined by the cycle of the planet Jupiter). At the same time, the appearance of the gods themselves, the color of *qi* that they spit out, and the texts, talismans, and prayers recited to them also follow a cycle as set out in the *Method of the*

Nine Perfected. As a result, the process of biospiritual transformation is not simply to be understood as the "fusion" of human and heavenly worlds. Rather, the process involves the interlocking of complex cycles of energy transformation that operate on yinyang principles of waxing and waning with various frequencies or periodicities. In this sense, the framework for religious transformation is a complex network or ecology of relations that obtains within multiple overlapping dimensions of a cosmic frame: the internal physiological frame; the heavenly frame of natural transformations as determined by the sun, moon, planets, and stars; and the wholly religious dimension of culturally postulated super human realities, the visual imagination of the gods themselves.

The *Eight Secret Sayings of the Dao* reveals a similar pattern, though the method of religious transformation is quite different. Like the *Method of the Nine Perfected*, it involves a sequence of prayers that takes place over a year, in this case following eight of the twenty-four "solar terms," the main nodes of the solar calendar beginning with the day *lichun* 立春 (start of spring), usually February 4 in the Gregorian calendar (the text also specifies other times when these rituals may be performed). On these days, the adept is to face a certain direction, look for clouds of certain colors, and then he or she will see a Daoist deity riding on a carriage through the skies to visit the Jade Emperor, the highest deity in the pantheon. At this point, the adept is to engage in a visualization in which he makes a petition to the Jade Emperor, with the hope that the adept will have the chance to be transformed into one of the perfected immortals.¹²

This formula differs from the *Method of the Nine Perfected* in that it does not directly involve the visualization of liquid vitality being transmitted from the mouth of the god to the body systems of the adept. Rather, it involves visualizing in one's heart-mind (*xinmin* 心府) a courtly audience in which the adept kowtows to the Jade Emperor and makes his formal request to become one of the perfected. This text thus follows a formal, bureaucratic religious process in which spiritual power is transmitted through ritual obeisances and by conveying oral requests to the highest god of the pantheon.¹³

Nonetheless, the outstanding feature of this sequence of prayers is the formal system of conjunctions and correlations that it follows. Like in the *Method of the Nine Perfected*, the external observation of the clouds and the internal visualization of the gods are to take place in accordance with the solar calendar and are to follow a strict cosmological pattern. On different solar terms, the adept should face different directions, observe

different colored clouds and different intermediary gods, and offer prayers to a different high god. Like the *Method of the Nine Perfected*, the text's key information is the details of the various combinations of cycles that must be precisely observed so as to unlock the power of religious transformation. Both texts depend on the system of correlations and correspondences, themselves underwritten by the fundamental binary transformation of energy cycles according to an overall process of yinyang.

In both these cases, therefore, the religious process is built upon and determined by the yinyang pattern. Even the gods themselves function in accordance with the natural cycles of the sun, stars, and planets. Indeed, the very definition of their divinity may be said to lie in their perfect coordination with these cycles. The uneducated human does not naturally understand how these cycles function together so as to unlock transformative power. Such people live in ignorance of these powerful rhythms and as a result do not have the chance to experience radical biospiritual transformation within the interiority of the physical frame. The privileged Daoist adept, on the contrary, is given the key that unlocks the mystery of these combinations. The Daoist adept knows how all the various natural cycles function together to produce transformative power that can be absorbed in the somatic liquidity of the bodyscape.

Pervasion and Penetration

Komjathy notes what he terms a famous Daoist saying, "Out of step with the times, but not with the seasons," which he interprets as meaning that the values and experiences of the Daoist adherent may not be those of the "dominant society."¹⁴ Put in more positive light, the Daoist, as noted in the previous section, should act in concert with the seasons, the shifting patterns of time and circumstance in his or her context or environment; moreover, this should be his or her overriding concern, not what is dictated by external social forces. Komjathy mentions this saying in the context of a discussion of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) Daoist mediation practice and, specifically, the way in which the Daoist community noted several "boons along the way," or signs of the acquisition of spiritual powers. Such powers are termed "numinous abilities" or "numinous pervasions" (*lingtong* 靈通). He writes:

The "Lun liutong jue" (Instructions on the Six Pervasions), a Yuan dynasty internal alchemy text, provides a clear description:

- (1) Pervasion of Heart-mind Conditions, involving the ability to experience unified nature as distinct from the ordinary body;
- (2) Pervasion of Spirit Conditions, involving the ability to know things beyond ordinary perception;
- (3) Pervasion of Celestial Vision, involving the ability to perceive internal landscapes within the body;
- (4) Pervasion of Celestial Hearing, involving the ability to hear the subtle communications of spirits and humans;
- (5) Pervasion of Past Occurrences, involving the ability to understand the karmic causes and effects relating to the Three Worlds of desire, form, and formlessness;
- (6) Pervasion of the Heart-minds of Others, involving the ability to manifest the body-beyond-the-body. (Neidan jiyao, DZ.1258, 3.12a-14a)¹⁵

These "supernatural" abilities are described as "pervasions," an unusual term that requires some explanation. The Chinese term is *tong* 通, and it goes back as far as the early Daoist work of mystical philosophy, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, where the scholar Yan Hui describes his wishes to make himself "identical with the Great Thoroughfare" or "Great Pervasion" ("tong yu da tong" 同於大通). This is usually taken to denote a state of mystical realization in which the individual's subjectivity is merged with the ultimate reality of the Dao.

In the text cited by Komjathy, this mystical realization, however, is specified as six specific instances of pervasion, typically involving the ability to see or perceive things that lie beyond the common sensory powers of the ordinary person. These superhuman abilities go back also to the earlier descriptions of the abilities of "immortals" or "transcendents." Here, it is important to note that such people did not merely prolong life within their existing bodies, but rather gained new abilities as part of the transformation toward immortality or transcendence. Benjamin Penny lists several sets of abilities, including the ability to travel and exist in the world in a seemingly superhuman way: "They can walk great distances in a day, run at great speeds, possess great strength and are impervious to extreme temperatures. . . . Like the perfected in the *Zhuangzi*, they can 'enter water without getting wet and fire without getting burnt'—an almost

proverbial statement in the texts."¹⁶ What unites the abilities described in this paragraph with those pervasions cited by Komjathy is the seeming transparency or porosity between the individual and his or her environment. For instance, the ability to enter water without getting wet, or fire without getting burned, suggests that the body of the individual functions like that of a chameleon, adapting itself perfectly to its environment and not suffering the normal range of environmental harms that water or fire would inflict on an ordinary body. At the same time, Komjathy's list also suggests that the "gap" between the individual and the environment is diminished to an absolute minimum, allowing that person to know more, hear more, and see more. In this way, the transformed body is supremely sensitive, able to absorb more perceptions of the world than an ordinary person can.

The tradition came to describe such abilities not in the language of "magic" or "the supernatural" but with the term *tong*, which is conventionally translated as "pervasion." The basic meaning of this term is "to go through" from one place to another. It denotes "connection" or "interpenetration" in the way that a tunnel "pervades" a hill by connecting one side with the other. In modern Chinese, it appears in the binome *jiao-tong*, meaning "traffic" or "communication."

An ecocritical reading of this term suggests that the experience of "pervasion" or "signs of pervasion" should not be treated as the acquisition of supernatural powers, in the sense that these powers enable the adept to wield some magical ability over the natural world. That is to say, these pervasions do not mean that the adept has somehow acquired transcendental or superhuman powers. Rather, these signs should be treated as the special ways that a transformed Daoist body is able to perceive and integrate with its natural environment. The reason for this transformation is that the fully realized, subtle body of the experienced Daoist practitioner is an absolutely porous body, one that is fully open to its environmental context, enabling the "heart-mind" of the practitioner to fully engage with and respond to its context.

The notion of pervasion as an ideal is one that is relatively widespread in Chinese culture. For instance, in *Analects* 2.4, Confucius described his own process of self-cultivation in terms that suggest the increasing integration of the self and its context: "The master said: 'At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my place; at forty I became free of doubts; at fifty I knew the will of heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the mark.'"

Although he did not describe this in terms of pervasion, the key idea here concerns the relationship between the individual, his own will and desires, and those of "heaven," a term that can equally be used to refer to "nature" and denotes the basic existential context in which the individual lives.¹⁷ When Confucius was young, he was keen to "learn" and to "take his place." When he was older, he came to know the "will of heaven," which is to say, the ultimate disposition of things in the cosmos. He learned to become "attuned" to this disposition and eventually was able to fully align his own will or personality with that of his ultimate context (the will of heaven) "without overstepping the mark." This is a classic description of pervasion as a sagely ideal; it denotes the full adaptation of the individual within the "ecosystem" or network of meanings and ultimate ordering of things.

For Confucius, this is ultimately a psychological process involving the "heart-mind," the organ of affect and rationality that, according to Confucian moral philosophy, can be trained through a systematic process of "teaching" (*jiao* 教) and "learning" (*xue* 學); note here that education as learning is far more important than education as teaching). While Zhuangzi and other Daoists may have had some similar ideas about the goal of the cultivation process, they strongly disagreed with the Confucians that the means to achieve this should be through a focus on "learning" (*xue*) or that the most important organ of the body should be the heart-mind (*xin*). Rather, for the Daoist tradition as a whole, the process of cultivation toward the attainment of "pervasion" is one that is thoroughly somatic, taking place in and through the body, conceived not simply as a heart-mind directing inert "matter" but rather as a network of yinyang processes of liquid vitality. In this regard, as noted in the previous chapter, the bodyscape is no different, ultimately, from the landscape that it inhabits. From the perspective of a Daoist ecology, therefore, it is not the particular cognitive capacities of the heart-mind that enable the self to be fully attuned to the cosmos it inhabits, but rather the underlying symmetry of the body with its environment.

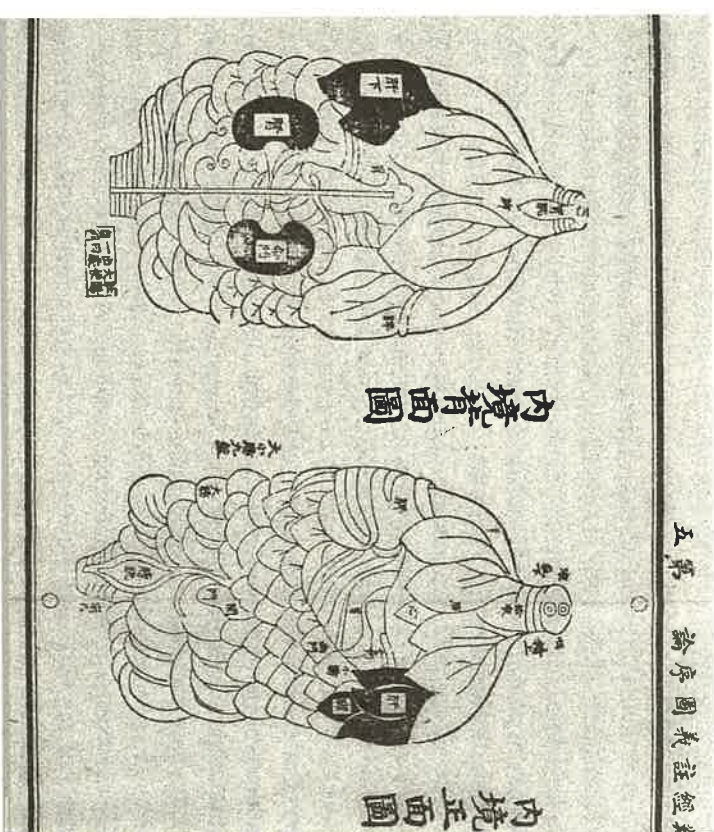
This underlying symmetry, however, is obscured by the density of the skin, which prevents humans from observing the ways their bodies function as liquid landscapes. Only through a learned process of "interior vision" or "visualization" does it become possible to fully realize the underlying similarity of the bodyscape with the landscape. Here, it is useful to relate an episode in the biography of a Daoist perfected, born Zhou Yishan 周義山 in 80 B.C.E. His "esoteric" or "inner" biography presents

the story of how he progressed from being a misunderstood young man, whose natural affinity with the Dao mystified his father, to a Daoist transcendent of the highest rank, given the title "Perfected Purple Yang."¹⁸ Two features of his early biography stand out. The first is that as a young man he practiced the daily worship of the sun, in which he would get up at dawn, face east, and absorb the sunlight:

As a rule, right after first light and before the sun had come up, he stood facing due east. He rinsed his mouth, swallowed saliva, absorbed [the solar] qi one hundred times and made a double bow to the sun. He did this dawn after dawn for a number of years. His father thought this was odd and asked him what kind of activity it was. Lord Zhou made a full-length genuflection then replied: "I, Yishan, deep in my heart love the splendor of the sunlight and its eternal radiance. This is the only reason why I bow before it."¹⁹

The text does not give any further explanation for this practice, but it brings to mind the phrase noted by Komjathy (discussed earlier) in which the Daoist is one who is attuned to the rhythm of the seasons rather than the fashion of the times. In this case, Zhou's life is oriented around the sunrise, and he persists in his morning practice even though his father, who represents patriarchal power and social normativity, cannot grasp why he is doing it. Of note here is that Zhou's practice involves the ritual worship of the sun, absorbing its *qi* and at the same time absorbing the saliva produced in his mouth. He is thereby achieving a correspondence between the *qi* systems of his body (as manifested in saliva) and the *qi* systems of the wider world (as manifested in sunlight). He simultaneously absorbs the external *qi* of the sun and the internal *qi* of the saliva.

The second feature of his early biography that stands out is the elixir of immortality that Zhou received from Su Lin. The text records that the elixir, compounded from various roots and herbs, is to be taken at dawn when facing east. This recalls the practice that Zhou had undertaken as a young man, but it is here presented in an intensified, alchemical form. Zhou is instructed to gradually increase the dosage until he is taking about a dozen pills a day, and that "this will cause your body to become light and possess a radiant glow."²⁰ Zhou carries out this practice for five years. The result was that "his body produced a transparent glow so that it was possible to see right through to his five [zang] organs."²¹



Woodblock illustration from the Zhengtong daozeang (Daoist canon compiled during the Zhengtong reign period [1436–1449] of the Ming dynasty), depicting the "internal topography" (*neijing*) of the human body from the front and back view. (Wellcome Library, London, Creative Commons Attribution only licence CC BY 4.0)

Whether understood literally or metaphorically, the significance of this practice is clear: the goal of this set of Daoist practices is to achieve a pervasion of the body by the energy of the sun, and the result of this pervasion is the increased transparency, radiance, and porosity of the skin itself. What Zhou achieves by absorbing the sunlight through ritual practice and alchemy is the transparency of his own skin. The ecological significance of this transformation deserves careful consideration. While I am in no way claiming that what Zhou was engaged in was something that he understood from the perspective of "ecological" thought, I am claiming that this practice of absorbing the vitality of the sun and the concomitant increasing transparency of the skin reveals an important point for ecocritical thinking. The point is that when the skin is understood first and foremost as a barrier between the outer landscape and the inner bodyscape, the result is a practical reluctance to grasp how the

liquid vitalities of the landscape pervade and circulate within the inner bodyscape of the individual. Consequently, it is difficult to understand how environmental devastation has a direct effect on the health of the body. If the health of the body is something that apparently functions wholly autonomously and independently from its external environment, then it is easy to poison the world outside without realizing that this is also poisoning the world within the body.

The effect of Zhou's practice, then, is to arrive at the realization that his skin is more of a porous membrane than a physical barrier. In so doing, he is able to see for himself the "internal organs" of his body. But here we must remember that the *zang* organs do not refer simply to the physical flesh of the heart, liver, and the like but rather to the organs as nodes within the networks of vitality that flow within the body. The full revelation of this practice, then, is to see how the liquid vitality of the bodyscape functions in correlation with the liquid vitality of the landscape. In this way, the skin itself becomes an even more sensitive organ of sensation, a mode of perception and integration between the inner world of the body and the outer world of light and air. Understanding the skin as a mode of ecological relationship is not something that is commonly articulated in discourse on religion and ecology. Often, this discussion takes place in the context of moral theories, cosmological ideas, or discussions of science and religion. But the notion that this set of Daoist practices points toward is far more immediate and in a sense practical: to understand how human health and social relationships are embedded in the health of the environment and networks of ecological relationships, one should focus on the skin as the porous membrane through which the world pervades the body and the body pervades the world.

Queer Ecology

The headings of the previous sections have aimed to emphasize, perhaps provocatively so, the seemingly sexual nature of the transmission of fluids within the overall ecology of liquid vitality that permeates the worldview of Highest Clarity Daoism. The reason for this is not to suggest that these meditations took place within a heteronormative framework of the sexual body. In fact, as I argued earlier, the ecocritical read-

ing of these texts emphasizes quite the contrary: that whereas other Chinese models of power and authority derive from or relate to the genealogical transmission of "virtue" through the male line, the ecocritical reading that I offer here emphasizes that such "virtue" is to be transacted cosmologically, through correlation with the seasons, directions, colors, and so on. In employing the sexualized language of conjunction, orifice, and penetration, my goal has been to suggest a sexual undertone that suffuses the Highest Clarity techniques of transformation, in fact a queer sexuality that is not oriented toward heteronormative sexual reproduction. It is also an ecological sexuality in that the body is oriented toward the cosmos itself.

Before turning to a queer ecocritical reading of Daoist praxis, it may be useful to define and examine standard ways in which religious studies has approached Daoist sexuality. This topic has attracted considerable commentary and debate, partly as a result of a natural fascination with matters of sexuality in their relationship to religion, but also as a matter of internal debate within the Daoist tradition and argument between Buddhists and Daoists.

Gil Raz begins his discussion of Daoist sexual practices with a quotation from an anti-Daoist polemical text written by a convert to Buddhism, Zhen Luan 甄鸾 (535–566): "Husbands were instructed to exchange wives merely for carnal pleasure. Practitioners had no shame, even before the eyes of their fathers and elder brothers. This they called the 'perfect method of concentrating pneuma.' At present, Daoists regularly engage in these practices, in order thereby to attain the Way."²² Given that this discussion of Daoist sexual practices occurs in such a polemical text, it is difficult to know how widespread such practices were or how accurate Zhen Luan's characterization of them was. Nonetheless, it does seem clear that Daoists engaged in ritualized forms of sexual intercourse in which the liquid vitality of men and women were exchanged. Corroboration comes from the fact that such practices were also condemned within the tradition, not just by Buddhist outsiders.²³ This suggests that although the practices were generally understood within a heterosexual framework, they did not reproduce the heteronormative patriarchy that Buddhist or other scholars championed. That is to say, the condemnation arose because such practices were seen to be defying socially normative mores regarding sexuality, mores that favored either single-sex Buddhist abstinence or Confucian patriarchy. It is also entirely possible that homoerotic

versions of such practices may have taken place in single-sex monasteries, though of course given the hidden nature of such practices, it is impossible to know what may have taken place.

The key issue in the interpretation of such practices, as Raz notes, has been the relationship between sexuality and cosmology, that is to say, the way in which the pairing of yin and yang vitality mirrors or reenacts the fundamental cosmological pattern of yinyang. In this line of thinking the transaction of sexual energies should not, in the first place, be read in terms of erotic power (which is the anti-Daoist claim articulated by Zhen Luan), but in terms of spiritual and cosmological transformation.

As an instance of such a transformation, Kristofer Schipper discusses one ritual in which sexual intercourse between a husband and wife takes place in the context of their ordination into a higher rank of the Celestial Master's tradition.²⁴ The uniting of their sexual vitality here performed a religious, cosmological, and socially transformative function. It was not framed as a lewd erotic act, except by the rite's detractors. The interpretations of Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn focus on the rites for the union of *qi* between men and women as rehearsals or reenactments of the primordial patterning of yinyang.²⁵ Raz, however, focuses not on the idea that such rituals reproduced cosmic patterns of yin and yang, but rather that they produced a somatic transformation within the body of the adepts.²⁶ For the adepts, in Raz's view, the significance of ritualized sexual intercourse is not about the reproductive sexuality itself, the merging of yin and yang, but about the nature of transformation that it, like any other Daoist practice, produces in the practitioner. This reading is altogether more subversive than perhaps Raz realizes. It suggests that Daoist sexuality, even Daoist heterosexuality, need not function in service of patriarchal genealogical reproduction, but should ideally serve to produce a radical spiritual transformation of the participants.

In the Highest Clarity tradition, the practice of sexual transformation is queered even further. Firstly, this tradition takes on an interiorized, spiritualized form in the hierogamies or "sacred marriages" between the adept and a god (usually of the opposite sex). Secondly, the tradition advocated visualization practices in which adepts individually engaged in the production of spiritual rebirth without needing to engage physically with any other person. As Raz quotes:

There is no need to bother about techniques performed by man and woman together for cycling and augmenting essences. Moreover,

intercourse with a woman for the purpose of rising to the heavens and recycling pneumas [*qi*] in order to become a Celestial Transcendent are methods more treacherous than fire and water.²⁷

As a historian, Raz wants to make clear that his interpretation of these practices proceeds by putting them in the historical context of contemporaneous Daoist practices, rather than within the whole body of literature both Daoist and non-Daoist, that concerns the "arts of the bedroom." My goal, by contrast, is to understand these practices from the perspective of the fundamental relationship between cosmic vitality and sexual vitality.

To read these practices from the perspective of a Daoist ecology, oriented around the concept of "pervasion," means to understand from a vitalistic, ecological framework that crosses the boundaries between the human and nonhuman worlds. The fundamental porosity of this boundary is symbolized by metaphors of pervasion or the translucence of the skin; here, the overwriting of cosmic and sexual, heavenly and earthly patterns of engagement in a fluid discourse suggests that both human sexuality and cosmic vitality are transacted within an overall ecology of cosmic power, namely, the flourishing of the Dao. As such, the goal is not preservation or conservation of the status quo or the reproduction of patriarchal genealogies, but rather the performance of somatic transformation, a process that I describe as "transfiguration."

The Daoist texts and practices discussed here function so as to effect a transfiguration of the body, a somatic rewriting of the mode of engagement between the adept and his or her context. Crucially, this engagement is not produced by virtue of the subjective agency of the individual, but by correlation between the individual and the cosmic context that frames the individual's location. The process of transfiguration is thus irreducibly local, occurring within the materiality of the practitioner, but also reaches out to immediate horizons of meaning and cosmic vitality that frame that person, and extends ultimately to everyone within the world. It is most definitely not a heteronormative, genealogical process of the sustainability or continuity of the status quo, but rather a queer ecological one. It is queer in that it fails to reproduce heteronormative genealogy and instead approaches Judith Butler's notion of resistance to heterosexist gender performance. In her argument, the performance of heteronormativity is founded upon the ideological supposition of absolute boundaries between self and world, male and female, inside and outside.²⁸ Daoist sexual anthropology shares a queer sensibility in which yang and yin are

not construed as absolute categories whose function is principally oriented toward sexual reproduction, but rather as processes that take place within a body that is engaged with the world around in a process of continuous transformation. In this sense, Daoist sexual anthropology can also be viewed as ecological in character, in that it arises from the transaction of liquid vitality of the body in the context of an overall ecology of cosmic power, an ecology mediated or transacted through the radical penetrability, porosity, and permeability of the flesh in its relation to the cosmos. It is a celebration of a radically queer ecology.

The next chapter considers this ecological relationship from the perspective not of the individual practitioner but rather the physical spaces in and through which such transactions take place. For now, however, the important characteristic that this gives to any Daoist ecological discourse is that the transfiguration of the body is seen as the inevitable functioning of the Dao within the world. As a consequence, the goal of any ecological ethic that may derive from such a view cannot focus solely on environmental conservation or the preservation of some natural space in an absolutely wild state. The Daoist focus on transformation within nature (*bianhua* 變化) and the concomitant transfiguration of the body through the porosity of the flesh suggests a radical process of continuous cultivation (*xiudao*) as the best mode of engagement between the individual and his or her environmental context. In such a context, the individual, the social world, and the cosmos are locked together in a process of coevolution and mutual interpenetration. Subjectivity is distributed radically throughout such an ecological matrix, dissolving the boundaries between self and other in favor of a continuous ecology of transfiguration. Such a transfiguration is, in the traditions of Daoism articulated here, an act that takes place in specific locations and requires an understanding of the Daoist construction of space and place.

5 The Locative Imagination

Early in my academic career, I was introduced to a Daoist lay practitioner who had spent a lifetime in the vicinity of Mt. Wudang, one of Daoism's most famous holy mountains today. I had been introduced to her as a scholar of Daoism in the West and, in a familiar ritual of inspection, she proceeded to interrogate me as to the extent of my knowledge about the Daoist tradition. Her first question, however, differed radically from any other opening question that I had previously been asked by scholars and colleagues within the field of Daoist studies. She asked how many mountains I had visited. She was, of course, referring to Daoist holy mountains, home to monasteries and temples, hermits, and seekers of immortality. Such mountains have played a central role in the Daoist religious landscape for centuries. Their sacred status is marked by inscriptions improbably etched into cliff faces, pavilions perched on lofty eyries, and temples carved out of caves. This book is, in part, an attempt to explain how and why knowledge of a religious tradition can be measured not by the numbers of texts read, nor by the depth of theological reasoning, but by experience of specific places, and their particular topographies, ecosystems, and environments.

All religions, of course, have their sacred spaces: they are typically places where significant events occurred in the lives of religious heroes.