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Transforming the Void

Embryological Discourse and Reproductive Imagery in East Asian Religions

Edited by

Anna Andreeva and Dominic Steavu



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Creation and Its Inversion: Cosmos, Human Being, and Elixir in the *Cantong Qi* (The Seal of the Unity of the Three)

Fabrizio Pregadio

Like other cosmological sciences that have been developed in different times and places, Taoist alchemy relies on a set of fundamental principles that define the relation between two domains, which can be designated as the ultimate principle and its manifestation, Unity and multiplicity, the Absolute and the relative, and in many other ways. Even though one might argue that this relation does not occur because nothing exists outside or other than the Absolute, those principles are used for two main purposes, both of which are significant in the perspective of the domain of relativity. The first is to explicate the bond between the Absolute and its manifestation; the second is to frame self-cultivation and ritual practices that intend to lead adepts from the latter to the former domain, or to enable a whole community to benefit from the connection between the two domains established, on their behalf, by ordained priests. Once a tradition – in our case, the Taoist tradition – formulates those principles, they may be applied to a variety of cosmological sciences, in ways and to extents that may remarkably differ from one another: within the same tradition we find instances in which a cosmological science opens a way to surpass the boundaries of the cosmic domain, but also instances in which the outlook remains restricted to that domain, or even to particular aspects of it (for example, the human body).

With regard to alchemy – with ritual, the main cosmological science in Taoism – the most complete exposition of the fundamental principles and of their application is found in the *Cantong qi* 參同契, or *Seal of the Unity of the Three*. This work, traditionally attributed to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽 and generally dated to the second century CE, has provided the foundations for most forms and lineages of Taoist alchemy, which have placed it at the origins of their teachings and practices. Some of these forms and lineages pertain to Waidan 外丹, or External Alchemy, but the large majority pertain to Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy.¹

¹ I will not discuss here issues of authorship and dating of the *Cantong qi*. On these matters, and on the relation of the text to Waidan and Neidan, see the Introduction in Fabrizio

As its title indicates, the *Cantong qi* is concerned with three main subjects, and joins them to one another into a single body of doctrine and practice. The first subject is principles of metaphysics and cosmology, formulated mainly on the basis of the *Yijing* 易經, or *Book of Changes*. The second subject is the highest state of realisation, identified as the Taoist way of “non-doing” (*wuwei* 無為) in accordance with the principles of the *Daodejing* 道德經, or *Book of the Way and Virtue*. The third subject is alchemy, defined as the conjunction of True Yin and True Yang, which are represented by alchemical images (True Mercury and True Lead, respectively) and by several other emblems. Concerning the first two subjects, the *Cantong qi* gives a synopsis of the doctrinal principles; concerning the third one, it outlines the main features of its own cosmological science, namely alchemy.²

In this way, the *Cantong qi* proposes an integral description of doctrine and practice, including both the principles and their application. Within this framework, it uses – like Taoism in general – multiple sets of concepts and symbolic forms in order to explain how the absolute principle, or the Dao, manifests itself through a series of consecutive stages that lead from Non-Being to multiplicity, and in order to devise a practice that traces those stages in a reverse sequence. In this chapter, I present passages of the *Cantong qi* that are concerned with these subjects. In particular, these passages answer three main questions. First, how does the Dao, the absolute and unchangeable (*chang* 常, “constant”) principle, give birth to the world in which we live, which is ruled by relativity and change? Second, how is the human being generated? Finally, how does a cosmological science, namely alchemy, provide the means to accomplish the return from the relative to the absolute domain, and to

Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), esp. 11–27 and 53–63.

- 2 The three subjects are reflected in the title of the *Cantong qi* and are mentioned in its verses. In section 84, the *Cantong qi* refers to the *Yijing*, the Taoist teachings on “non-doing,” and alchemy (“the work with the fire of the furnace”), and then adds: “These three Ways stem from one, / and together yield one path”; 三道由一、俱出徑路. Section 87 states: “I have tendered three twigs, / but their branches and stalks are bound to one another: / they come forth together but have different names, / as they all stem from one gate”; 羅列三條、枝莖相連、同出異名、皆由一門. On the title of the *Cantong qi*, see Meng Naichang 孟乃昌, *Zhouyi cantong qi kaobian* 『周易參同契』考辯 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 62–65 and 97–98; and Pregadio 2011, 2–5. In addition to Lead and Mercury, emblems that represent the conjunction of Yin and Yang include Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ among the trigrams; the dyads Water/Fire and Wood/Metal among the Five Agents; *wu* 戊 and *ji* 己 among the celestial stems; and 5 as formed by 4+1 and by 3+2 among numbers.

realize their fundamental identity? As we shall see, the views of the *Cantong qi* concerning the first question serve to answer the other two.

1 General Principles

The main points of the doctrine of the *Cantong qi* on the relation between the principle and its manifestation are stated in the initial verses of the text:

“Qian ☰ and Kun ☷ are the door and the gate of change,
the father and the mother of all hexagrams.
Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are the inner and the outer walls,
they spin the hub and align the axle.
Female and male, these four trigrams
function as a bellows and its nozzles.³

乾坤者易之門戶、眾卦之父母、坎離匡郭、運轂正軸、牝牡四卦、以為橐籥。

It should be noted, to begin with, that although their names belong to the vocabulary of the *Yijing*, it would not be possible to understand the functions that Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li perform in a work like the *Cantong qi*, and in Taoist alchemy in general, as long as they are seen merely as trigrams or hexagrams. In the perspective of the *Cantong qi*, Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li are formless principles that illustrate how the Dao generates the cosmos and manifests itself in it. The corresponding trigrams and hexagrams are images (*xiang* 象, symbolic forms) that represent those principles.

In this view, Qian and Kun designate the two primary modes taken on by the Dao as it generates the relative domain and manifests itself in it. As we read in two famous statements of the *Yijing*:

Great indeed is Qian, the Origin! The ten thousand things owe their

3 *Cantong qi* 1. Quotations of the *Cantong qi* in this chapter are drawn from my translation cited in note 1 above and follow its numbering of sections. The base text is the Jinling shufang 金陵書房 (Nanjing Print Shop; 1484) edition of Chen Zhixu's 陳致虛 (1290–ca. 1368) *Zhouyi cantong qi zhujie* 周易參同契注解 (Commentary and Explication of the *Cantong qi*), which is also available, under this or different titles, in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete Texts of the Four Repositories), the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要 (Essentials of the Taoist Canon), and in several other editions. The first verse of the present poem derives from the “Appended Sayings” (“Xici” 繫辭) of the *Yijing*, B.5.

beginning to him. [...] Perfect indeed is Kun, the Origin!
The ten thousand things owe their birth to her.⁴

大哉乾元、萬物資始。 [...] 至哉坤元、萬物資生。

Qian is the active (“creative”) principle, the essence, Yang, and Heaven. Kun is the passive (“receptive”) principle, the substance, Yin, and Earth. As they join to give birth to the cosmos, Qian entrusts his creative power to Kun, and Kun, impregnated by Qian, brings creation to accomplishment. In the symbolic representation by the corresponding trigrams, the Yang of Qian moves into Kun, and, in response, the Yin of Kun moves into Qian: Qian ☰ becomes Li ☲, and Kun ☷ becomes Kan ☵. The cosmos and all entities and phenomena within it are generated through the continuous enactment of this process. Therefore, as we read in the poem of the *Cantong qi* quoted above, Qian and Kun are “the door and the gate” through which manifestation, dominated by change, comes forth, and “the father and the mother” of all other emblems that represent change.

Having been generated as a consequence of the conjunction of Qian and Kun, the other two main trigrams, namely Kan and Li, illustrate the operation of the two primary principles within the cosmic domain. Since Kan and Li embrace the essences of Qian and Kun, represented by the inner lines of the respective trigrams, they provide “inner and outer walls” to Qian and Kun: the Yin principle (Kan ☵) harbours the True Yang of Qian (its inner solid line), and the Yang principle (Li ☲) harbours the True Yin of Kun (its inner broken line).

In the fourth verse, the same view is illustrated with another image that adds a further detail. If the two sets of walls, inner and outer, are shaped as joined semicircles, they form a wheel (see Fig. 5.1).⁵ The Emptiness from which existence comes forth is the central hub; Qian and Kun are the axle passing through the hub, which holds the wheel in position; and the wheel with its spokes represents the compass of space and the cycles of time governed by Kan and Li. The wheel, therefore, is the frame (*ti* 體) that enables Emptiness to

4 *Yijing*, “Commentary on the Judgement” (“Tuanzhuan” 彖傳) on the hexagrams Qian ☰ and Kun ☷. It seems impossible, in this and similar cases, to use the gender-neutral pronoun “it” to refer to Qian and Kun, as they are by no means “neutral.” —Unless otherwise stated, all the translations into English are my own.

5 This wheel is used in the *Taiji tu* 太極圖 (Chart of the Great Ultimate), where it represents the stage of the division of the One into the Two. It is also equivalent to – in fact, the precursor of – the well-known “fish-like” Yin-Yang emblem, where the black half contains a white dot (corresponding to the inner line of Kan ☵, “Yang within Yin”), and the white half contains a black dot (corresponding to the inner line of Li ☲, “Yin within Yang”).

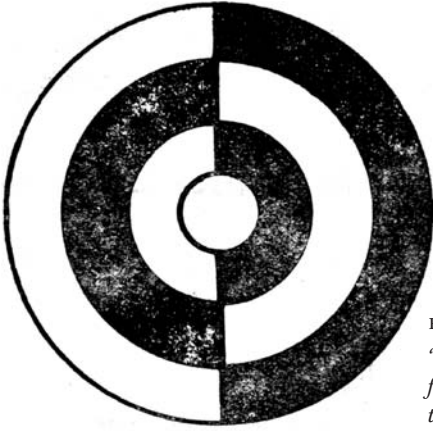


FIGURE 5.1

"Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are the inner and outer walls"
from Cantong qi 參同契 (*The Seal of the Unity of
the Three*), 1.

operate (or "function," *yong* 用) throughout space and time. As several commentators have remarked, the *Cantong qi* here uses the same images found in the *Daode jing*: "Thirty spokes share one hub: wherein there is nothing lies the function of a carriage. [...] Therefore, in what is there lies the benefit; in what is not there lies the function."⁶

Using another image, different in appearance but analogous in nature, the final two verses compare Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li to a bellows and its nozzles. The bellows (Qian and Kun) is empty, but sends forth its breath through the nozzles (Kan and Li). This image too alludes to a passage in the *Daode jing* which refers to the empty centre from which existence comes forth by saying, "The space between Heaven and Earth – is it not like a bellows? As empty, it is never exhausted; as it moves, it continues to pour."⁷

2 Creating the World

The poem quoted above describes cosmogony as a continuous process through which the Dao generates the world by means of Qian and Kun, which are placed at the centre of creation, and operates throughout it by means of Kan and Li, which rule over space and time. In the Taoist doctrine, however, the creation of the world is also described as the final result of a sequence of stages.

6 三十幅共一轂，當其無，有車之用。[...] 故有之以為利，無之以為用；*Daode jing* 11. The wheel and the carriage are two of the most recurrent images in the *Cantong qi*; see Pregadio 2011, 45–47.

7 天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出；*Daode jing* 5.

The Dao, the absolute principle, generates (*sheng* 生) these stages not out of “nothing,” but out of itself. Non-Being (*wu* 無) first determines itself as Being (*you* 有), whose primary property is Unity (*yi* 一). While this Unity is not manifested as such, it is at the origins of multiplicity: it contains within itself all of the possibilities of manifestation. Through the continuous conjunction of Qian and Kun, the male and the female principles, the “ten thousand things” (*wanwu* 萬物) are born.⁸

In the Chinese tradition, the main images of Qian and Kun are Heaven and Earth.⁹ Just like Heaven and Earth are immutably conjoined and never exchange their positions, so too Qian and Kun constantly embrace one another. As Qian gives and Kun receives, the Essence (*jing* 精) of Qian and the Breath (*qi* 氣) of Kun are distributed, and creatures and phenomena are generated.¹⁰ The *Cantong qi* refers to these points as follows:

Qian ☰ the firm and Kun ☷ the yielding
join and embrace one another;¹¹
Yang endows, Yin receives,
the masculine and the feminine attend one to the other.
Attending, they create and transform,
unfolding their Essence and Breath.¹²

8 This view is meaningful only from the perspective of the last stage, since space and time – which provide the conditions for any “stage” to occur – only emerge at the end of the sequence: “In the Dao there is no ‘after’ or ‘before’” 夫道無後先; “[In the Dao] there is no interval between ‘this’ and ‘that,’ or between ‘now’ and ‘the past’” 無彼此今昔之間; *Xiyi zhimi lun* 析疑指迷論 (Essay on Resolving Doubts and Pointing Out Delusions; DZ 276), 9b; and *Daode zhenjing jiyi* 道德真經集義 (Collected Explanations of the True Book of the Way and Virtue; DZ 724), 2.24b, respectively.

9 And not vice versa, showing that Qian and Kun are pure principles and not merely trigrams or hexagrams. This view is also stated in the *Cantong qi*: “Heaven and Earth are the images of Qian and Kun” (sec. 4).

10 See the “Appended Sayings” of the *Yijing*: “Essence and Breath become the creatures” 精氣為物 (A.4). Essence pertains to Qian, and Breath to Kun. Spirit (*shen* 神), the third component of Being, is not included in this representation as it is the prior state of Unity in which Yin and Yang (or Qian and Kun) are still conjoined in indistinction. See “Appended Sayings”: “That in which Yin and Yang cannot be fathomed is called ‘Spirit’” 陰陽不測之謂神 (A.5).

11 See the “Appended Sayings”: “The firm [or Qian, the male principle] and the yielding [or Kun, the female principle] follow one another and generate change and transformation” 剛柔相推而生變化 (A.2); “The firm and the yielding follow one another, and therein occur the transformations” 剛柔相推、變在其中矣 (B.1).

12 *Cantong qi* 43.

乾剛坤柔、配合相包、陽稟陰受、雄雌相須、須以造化、精氣乃舒。

Kan and Li, as we have seen, are the counterparts of Qian and Kun within the manifested cosmos. Their main images are the Moon and the Sun, respectively, which – instead of being permanently motionless in their positions like Heaven and Earth – grow and decline in their cycles of ascent and descent. Through their alternation, Kan (Moon 月) and Li (Sun 日) nourish all beings with their light (明), which is actually the light of Qian and Kun that they contain within.¹³ This function of Kan and Li is “mysterious and obscure,” but the sages, says the *Cantong qi*, have provided a way to comprehend it:

Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are at the fore:¹⁴
 their radiance and glow come down and spread out.
 Mysterious and obscure, this can hardly be fathomed
 and cannot be pictured or charted.
 The sages gauged its depth;
 one with it, they set forth its foundation.¹⁵

坎離冠首、光耀垂敷、玄冥難測、不可畫圖、聖人揆度、參序元基。

For the *Cantong qi*, nevertheless, this configuration pertains to the relative domain in which we live: it is meaningful only within its boundaries, and its purpose is to explicate how the cosmos is tied to the Dao, or the relative to the Absolute. In fact, as we read in the verses that follow, Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li all fundamentally reside within the Dao, undifferentiated (“in indistinction”) from one another. The other emblems of the *Yijing* arrange themselves “like a chariot” (compare the image of the wheel and the *Daode jing* passage on the “function” of the carriage seen above) around this central and motionless prime mover, while representing its operation within space and time:

These four, in indistinction,
 are right within Empty Non-Being.

13 The *Cantong qi* (sec. 7) and other texts refer to this light as the “essence of the Moon” (*yuejing* 月精) and the “radiance of the Sun” (*riguang* 日光).

14 That is to say, they are at the forefront in the domain of the manifestation, where they have replaced Qian and Kun.

15 *Cantong qi* 43.

Sixty hexagrams revolve around them,¹⁶
 outspread like a chariot.
 Harnessing a dragon and a mare,¹⁷
 the bright noble man holds the reins of time.¹⁸

四者混沌、徑入虛無、六十卦周、張布為輿、龍馬就駕、明君御時。

Earth (Kun) brings the generative faculty of Heaven (Qian) to accomplishment; without the Earth, Heaven would not fulfil its power, and without Heaven, the Earth would be fruitless. The “bright noble man,” who is both the saintly person and the king, embodies and manifests the creative action of Heaven within the human world: the world for the saint, and the kingdom for the ruler, are what the Earth is for Heaven.

3 Generation and Periodic Regeneration: The Function of Kun

At all the stages, or the degrees, of its self-manifestation, the Dao possesses an active principle (Qian, Yang, movement) and a passive principle (Kun, Yin, quiescence): to use the image of the *Daode jing*, it is both the seed (or “essence,” *jing* 精) and the womb that harbours that seed.¹⁹ As mentioned above, Non-Being (*wu*) initially determines itself and gives birth to Being (*you*). From a state that, from our perspective, can only be characterised as Pure Yin (*chunyin* 純陰, quiescence) and be represented as Kun ☷, Non-Being in this way generates the state of Unity (*yi*), which in Taoist texts is often called Pure Yang (*chunyang* 純陽, movement) and is represented as Qian ☰. Since the “ten thou-

16 These are all the hexagrams except for Qian ☰, Kun ☷, Kan ☵ and Li ☲, which are not part of the cycle but determine it, being placed at the centre (in this symbolic function, the trigrams and the hexagrams Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li are equivalent). The sixty hexagrams mentioned in this poem represent, in particular, the thirty days of the lunar month. Two hexagrams rule on daytime and nighttime of one day, and their twelve lines are associated with the twelve “double hours” (*shi* 時) of that day. The 360 lines of the sixty hexagrams correspond to one month.

17 The dragon and the mare are images of Qian and Kun, respectively; see *Yijing*, hexagrams no. 1 and no. 2.

18 *Cantong qi* 43.

19 “The Dao is something so indistinct, so vague. [...] Vague and indistinct! Within there is something. Dim and obscure! Within there is an essence”; 道之為物惟恍惟惚。[...] 恍兮惚兮其中有物。窈兮冥兮其中有精; *Daode jing* 21.

sand things” are born from this Unity, the creation of the cosmos in the proper sense of the term – the shift from Unity to multiplicity – begins at this stage.

We may understand, therefore, why Unity is designated as Pure Yang and as Qian: in the representation of a creative process – in fact, of the process of creation itself – this stage can only be Yang because there is the need of an “initial impulse,” a movement that is the very nature of Qian.²⁰ To generate multiplicity, however, the state of Unity needs to determine the masculine and feminine functions that it already owns as the first self-determination of the Dao. The One “divides itself” (*fen* 分), and, through its own feminine function, it generates the Two, which are again Qian ☰ and Kun ☷, or Yin and Yang. The continuous conjunction of Qian and Kun – the father and the mother – leads to the birth of the “ten thousand things.”

This sequence of stages, each of which gives birth to the next one, could not occur without the generative function fulfilled by Kun, the feminine principle. We may distinguish three “times” in which the feminine principle performs this function when cosmogony is represented as a sequence of stages: first, when Non-Being gives birth to Being, the state of Unity; then when the One gives birth to the Two; and finally when Kun gives birth to the “ten thousand things.” In all these instances, Kun responds to the “impulse” given by the masculine principle – the “seed,” Qian, the father – in order to perform its maternal function.

The description of the lunar cycle in the *Cantong qi*, to which we shall now turn, illustrates the function of Kun in an event closely related to the generation of the cosmos: its periodic regeneration. The *Cantong qi* describes three main emblematic time cycles: the day, the month, and the year.²¹ The “One Breath of the Dao” (*dao zhi yiqi* 道之一氣) constantly rises and declines along each of these cycles and, through them, propagates itself all over the cosmos. Despite this and other analogies among the three cycles – each of which is an instance of the “wheel” seen above – the *Cantong qi* gives particular emphasis to the periodic regeneration of time in its description of the lunar cycle. It seems clear that this regeneration is most obviously represented by the

20 See Robinet, “Primus movens et création récurrente,” *Taoist Resources* 5.2 (1994): 37, where this generative aspect of the One – Unity as producer of multiplicity – is defined as the “activité efficace” of the Dao. See also her “Un, deux, trois: Les différentes modalités de l’Un et sa dynamique,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 8 (1995): 181–87.

21 For the cycle of the day, see *Cantong qi* 3 and 45; for the cycle of the month, 13 and 49; and for the cycle of the year, 51. Brief descriptions of these cycles are found in Xiao Hanming 萧汉明 and Guo Dongsheng 郭东升, *Zhouyi cantong qi yanjiu* 『周易参同契』研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 2001), 70–77, and Pregadio 2011, 41–43.

monthly lunar cycle, due to its evident analogies with the functions of procreation.

The description of the astronomic aspects of the lunar cycle in the *Cantong qi* is straightforward. Using a model inherited from classical Chinese cosmology, the lunar month is divided into six periods (*hou* 候) of five days: 1–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, 21–25, and 26–30. Each of these periods is represented by a trigram and a celestial stem (*tiangan* 天干). The sequence of trigrams and stems is Zhen ䷲ (*geng* 庚) → Dui ䷹ (*ding* 丁) → Qian ䷀ (*jia* 甲) → Xun ䷲ (*xin* 辛) → Gen ䷲ (*bing* 丙) → Kun ䷁ (*yi* 乙). As shown by this sequence, the first half of the lunar cycle is governed by the Yang principle (represented by the solid line), which flourishes until it culminates in the middle of the month (䷀). The second half is governed by the Yin principle (the broken line), which similarly grows until it overcomes the Yang principle at the end of the month (䷁).²²

The most significant aspect of this representation, which distinguishes it from a mere description of an astronomical phenomenon, is the symbolic event that occurs in the night between the end of a month and the beginning of the next month. During that night, the Sun, represented by Li ䷲, and the Moon, represented by Kan ䷜, meet at the centre of the cosmos and exchange their essences. Their conjunction replicates within space and time the unity of Qian ䷀ and Kun ䷁ in the precosmic domain, but this time results not in the generation, but in the regeneration, of the cosmos. The *Cantong qi* gives two descriptions of this event. In one of them, we read:

Between the month's last day and next month's first,
they [the Sun and the Moon] join their tallies and move to the Centre.
In the inchoate boundlessness,
female and male follow one another.
Their nurturing fluids moisten and impregnate,
their emanations and transformations flow and spread all through.²³

22 This representation of the lunar cycle is known as *yueti najia* 月體納甲 (Matching the Stems to the Moon's Body; *jia* 甲 in this name stands for all the celestial stems). The remaining two trigrams are associated with the Sun (Li ䷲) and the Moon (Kan ䷜), and we shall presently see their function in this representation. The formulation of this device is attributed to Yu Fan 虞翻 (164–233), a cosmologist and commentator of the *Book of Changes*, whose lineage almost certainly played a role in the early transmission of the *Cantong qi* (see Pregadio 2011, 14–17 and 24). On its application in the *Cantong qi*, see Xiao Hanming and Guo Dongsheng, 2001, 170–92.

23 *Cantong qi* 48.

晦朔之間、合符行中、混沌鴻濛、牝牡相從、滋液潤澤、施化流通。

By conjoining at the centre of the cosmos, Kan (the Moon) and Li (the Sun) fulfil the function of generating and sustaining life on behalf of Qian (Heaven) and Kun (Earth): “emanation” (*shi* 施, “giving forth”) is the function of Qian, “transformation” (*hua* 化, also meaning “bringing to life”) is the function of Kun.²⁴

In the other description of the conjunction of the Moon and the Sun, the *Cantong qi* says:

Between the month’s last day and dawn on next month’s first day, Zhen ䷲ comes to receive the token. At that moment, Heaven and Earth merge their essences, and the Sun and the Moon reach out for one another and hold onto one another.

The masculine Yang spreads his mysterious emanation,
the feminine Yin transforms her yellow wrap.
In indistinction they conjoin;
at this incipient time, the root is planted.
Steadily and orderly the seed is nourished;
from the coagulation of Spirit the corporeal frame is formed.
This is how living beings come forth:
even the wriggling worms all proceed from this.²⁵

晦至朔旦、震來受符、當斯之際、天地媾其精、日月相譚持、雄陽播玄施、雌陰化黃包、混沌相交接、權輿樹根基、經營養鄴鄂、凝神以成軀、穎夫蹈以出、蠕動莫不由。

24 *Hua* 化, commonly meaning “transformation,” is also attested in the sense of “generation.” An example is found in the *Huangdi neijing suwen* 黃帝內經素問 (Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor: Basic Questions) 66: “When something is generated, this is what we call *hua* (transformation); when something culminates, this is what we call *bian* (change); 物生謂之化、物極謂之變. According to this definition, while *bian* is only a change of state, *hua* designates a change that results in the birth of something new. The compound word *zaohua* 造化, which frequently recurs in Taoist texts, may therefore be understood not only in the sense of “creation and transformation,” but also of “creation and generation,” where creation (*zao*) is the function of Qian, and generation (*hua*) is the function of Kun. On the Chinese terms meaning “change,” see Sivin, “Change and Continuity in Early Cosmology: The Great Commentary to the *Book of Changes*,” in Yamada Keiji 山田慶兒 and Tanaka Tan 田中淡, eds., *Chūgoku kodai kagakushi ron* 中國古代科學史論 (Kyoto: Kyōto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 1991).

25 *Cantong qi* 10.

As we read in this passage, when Kan and Li conjoin, the active and the passive principles return to the initial state of indistinction. Qian endows Kun with its essence (which is “mysterious,” *xuan* 玄, a word emblematic of Heaven), and the womb (“wrap”) of Kun (which is yellow, the colour emblematic of Earth) is impregnated. Spirit produces that essence through its own coagulation (*ning* 凝). Thus Kun receives the seed of Qian and brings it to fruition.²⁶

The monthly conjunction of the Sun and the Moon regenerates light after the darkness of the month's last night. It also regenerates change: *yi* 易 (“change”) is the other graph formed when the graphs for “sun” (日) and “moon” (月) are placed not next to one another, but one above the other (see Fig. 5.2; we shall return to this point below). This regeneration is entrusted to Kun. At the end of the month, Kun, which is Pure Yin (*chunyin*), stands for the complete obscuration of the Yang principle, and rules over the entire cosmos. A full time cycle has ended, and, for one instant, the cosmos returns to its initial quiescence. However, as the state of Unity is reconstituted through the joining of the Sun and the Moon, Kun once again performs her function: she gives birth to her first son, Zhen ䷲, the initial trigram in the new lunar cycle, whose lower Yang line represents the rebirth of light. After an instant of suspension, time again begins to flow, and a new month begins.

4 Conception and Birth of the Human Being

In the view of the *Cantong qi*, the different forms and features of the manifested world owe their existence to the prime principle, the Dao, and to the four modes through which it manifests itself: Qian and Kun, Kan, and Li. Each form or phenomenon, therefore, “attests” to (*xiao* 效) and is a “sign” of (*zheng* 證) the principle by which it is generated and is, by analogy, an instance of that principle. The analogical function of forms and phenomena involves even the signs of the written language:

26 This “coagulation” is analogous to the spontaneous coagulation of the “essence” within the Dao itself (see note 19 above). It is also worthy of note that, in Internal Alchemy, *ning* 凝 is one of the terms used for the initial coagulation of the Elixir, or of the “embryo” within the practitioner's metaphoric “womb”; this essence also is the True Yang of Qian. For the words *xuan* 玄 and *huang* 黃, see the “Commentary on the Words of the Text” (“Wenyan zhuan” 文言傳) on the hexagram Kun ䷁ in the *Yijing*, sec. 3: “Mysterious and yellow’ means the merging (*za* 雜) of Heaven and Earth: Heaven is mysterious, and the Earth is yellow” 夫玄黃者、天地之雜也、天玄而地黃.

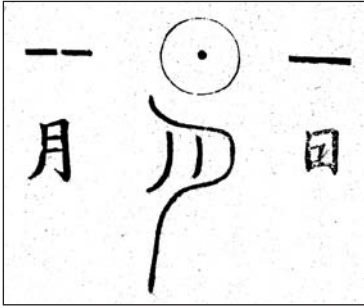


FIGURE 5.2

“Sun and Moon make change” The picture shows: on the right, a solid line (Yang) above the graph for “sun” (日); on the left, a broken line (Yin) above the graph for “moon” (月); at the center, stylised graphs for “sun” (above) and “moon” (below), together forming the graph for “change” (易). *Zhouyi tu* 周易圖 (Charts on the Book of Changes; DZ 157), 1.6a–b.

Drawing upon its evidence and seeing its attestations,
the Luminous Light is reckoned.

Graphs are joined by inferring the kinds;
they serve as signs for going back to the principle.²⁷

引驗見效、校度神明、推類結字、原理為證。

After a few more verses, the *Cantong qi* continues by saying, “Sun and Moon make change” (*ri yue wei yi* 日月為易) (section 7). This etymology of the graph for “change” (易), whose sense we have seen in the previous section, does not pertain to philology: it is, rather, an example of the function played by forms and phenomena as “signs” of the modes assumed by the Dao as it manifests itself.

Chinese cosmology, one of whose pillars is the idea of “correlation,” is especially suitable to express the concept of analogy: the various sets of cosmological emblems – Yin and Yang, the Five Agents, trigrams and hexagrams, and so forth – illustrate the relations that occur among different components of the cosmic domain, by classifying them into categories represented by the individual emblems.²⁸ The Taoist perspective adopts this view but adds – or emphasises – an important point: the cosmological emblems not only represent the features of the “ten thousand things” and the relations among them, but in the first place illustrate the process through which Unity generates mul-

²⁷ *Cantong qi* 6.

²⁸ For example, within the Five Agents, the emblem Wood establishes an analogy with spring regarding time, with the east regarding space, with the functions tied to the liver regarding to the human body, with the sound *jue* 角 regarding acoustic phenomena, and so forth. As Wood represents the Yang principle in its nascent state, all associated entities and phenomena are related to one another and are instances of that principle.

tiplicity. For this reason, the same emblems that represent the unfolding of Unity into multiplicity can also serve to represent the reverse process of return to Unity, which is (or should be) the primary purpose of every cosmological science. To make an example that concerns the Five Agents, Soil – the central agent – is not only the symbolic point of origin of the four external agents (Water, Fire, Wood, and Metal), but also their point of convergence. Therefore, the series of the Five Agents can be used to represent both the sequence of creation and its inversion.²⁹

The multiple relations established by Chinese cosmological thought form the structure of the macrocosm-microcosm theory, of which the human being is an integral part. As the *Cantong qi* follows this view, its description of the conception and birth of the individual is substantially identical – except for, as we shall see, one important detail – to its accounts of the generation of the cosmos. For the same reason, the birth of the individual is described as the result of the conjunction of Qian ☰ and Kun ☷, this time performed on their behalf not by the Sun and the Moon (Kan ☵ and Li ☲, as we have seen above), but by man and woman, or father and mother.

The description of the process that creates life in the *Cantong qi* begins with this stanza, which quotes two sentences from the *Yijing*:

“Qian is movement and is straight”:

Breath spreads and Essence flows.

“Kun is quiescence and is gathered”:

it is the hut of the Dao.³⁰

29 In Taoist alchemy, this inversion is often represented through the inversion of the “generation sequence” of the Five Agents (Wood → Fire → Soil → Metal → Water). The inversion focuses on two pairs of agents. While in the “generation sequence,” Wood generates Fire and Metal generates Water, in the alchemical process it is Fire (native cinnabar) that generates Wood (True Mercury), and Water (black lead) that generates Metal (True Lead). Through this inversion, Yang generates True Yin, and Yin generates True Yang. The *Cantong qi* refers to this pattern e.g., in section 23, to which we shall return below: “Metal is the mother of Water – [but] the mother is hidden in the embryo of her son” 金為水母、母隱子胎. This “reverse generation” is one step towards the reintegration of multiplicity into Unity: from a state represented by the number 4 it leads to a state represented by the number 2, and finally to the state represented by the number 1. On this point see *Cantong qi*, sec. 72: “When the Wooden essence of cinnabar finds Metal, they pair with each other: Metal and Water dwell in conjunction, Wood and Fire are companions” 丹砂木精、得金乃并、金水合處、木火為侶.

30 *Cantong qi* 55. The first and the third verses of this stanza derive from the “Appended Sayings” (A.5) of the *Yijing*: “Qian is collected in a state of quiescence, and straight in a state of movement. [...] Kun is gathered in a state of quiescence and open in a state of

乾動而直、氣布精流、坤靜而翕、為道舍廬。

Complying with their natures and qualities – movement and quiescence, respectively – Qian thus entrusts the essence that generates life to Kun; Kun receives the essence of Qian and brings creation to achievement:

The firm gives forth and then recedes,
the yielding transmutes and thereby nurtures.³¹

剛施而退、柔化以滋。

The poem continues with one of the most enigmatic statements found in the *Cantong qi*:

The 9 reverts, the 7 returns,
the 8 goes back, the 6 remains.³²

九還七返、八歸六居。

The symbolism of these two verses deserves attention, not only for its relevance to our present subject but also because this is one of the passages of the *Cantong qi* most frequently quoted in later alchemical texts. As described in this poem, the conjunction of male and female is first and foremost a return to the conjunction of Qian and Kun. The two verses above illustrate this process by means of images related to the Five Agents and their numerical values. This time, however, the conjunction of Qian and Kun does not result only in a return to the state of Unity: its purpose is the generation of a new life. Therefore, the agent representing the conjunction of Qian and Kun is not, as one might expect, Soil, which is placed at the centre of the Five Agents and represents their original unity, but Water, which is placed at the beginning of their “cosmogonic sequence.” Since Water is the first agent born from primal Unity, it

movement”; 夫乾、其靜也專、其動也直。[...] 夫坤、其靜也翕、其動也闢。The sexual connotations of these passages are obvious, but for those who might suppose that this or other passages of the *Cantong qi* describe “sexual practices,” it is sufficient to remind that the purpose of the conjunction of Qian and Kun is the biological function of procreation, which radically differs in both means and ends from the so-called “arts of the bedchamber.”

31 “Transmutes” can also be rendered as “brings to life,” as we have seen in note 24 above. *Cantong qi* 55.

32 Ibid.

represents the initial stage of a process that awaits its unfolding – the conception and the birth of a human being.³³

We may understand, therefore, why the return of the four external agents – Water, Fire, Wood, and Metal – to the state of Unity is described as “the 9 reverts, the 7 returns, the 8 goes back, the 6 remains.” These verses refer to the “generation numbers” and the “accomplishment numbers” (*shengshu* 生數 and *chengshu* 成數, respectively) of the agents, which are 1 and 6 for Water, 2 and 7 for Fire, 3 and 8 for Wood, and 4 and 9 for Metal. The state of Unity, to which the four external agents must return in order to generate life, is represented by the number 1, which in this configuration pertains to the first agent, Water. Hence, Metal (9) should “revert,” Fire (7) should “return,” and Wood (8) should “go back” to the 1 of Water. Unlike them, Water (6) already owns 1 as its “generation number”: not needing to perform any movement, it simply “remains.”

These verses underline the virtue of Water – an instance of Kun, the feminine principle – as a symbol of that which gives origin to life. They also relate Water to the generative function of the One, seen not as the transcendent unity beyond multiplicity (1 as the origin of numbers, but itself not a number), but as the producer of multiplicity (1 as the first number).³⁴ The rest of the poem continues along the same lines. In the next stanza, the masculine and feminine principles are represented by their essences (*jing*). Their colours, white and red, not only correspond to those of male semen and female blood but are also respectively associated with Metal and Fire in the system of the Five Agents. This leads to another symbolic account of the generative process, again expressed in an extremely concise way. This time, the description is based on the “conquest sequence” among the agents, but the process is concluded again with the return to the initial state emblematised by Water, “the first of the Five Agents.”³⁵ First, Metal and Fire contend with one another; then, Fire conquers Metal; finally, Water conquers Fire:

33 The “cosmogonic sequence” is the order in which the Five Agents are generated from Unity as part of the cosmogonic process. The sequence is Water → Fire → Wood → Metal → Soil. The *Cantong qi* refers to this sequence, in particular, in section 22 (“Water is the axis of the Dao: its number is 1”; 水者道樞、其數名一) and in section 72 (“the son is at the origin of the Five Agents”; 子五行始, where Water is the first “child” of the One, or Unity). There are several other important points concerning the role of Water in alchemy, which I cannot address here. On some of them, see the notes in Pregadio 2011, sec. 22.

34 On this aspect of Unity in Taoism see Robinet 1995, 177–81.

35 The “conquest sequence” is the order in which the Five Agents overcome or displace one another after they are generated. The sequence is Water → Fire → Metal → Wood → Soil (to

Man is white, woman is red;
Metal and Fire seize one another.
Water then stabilises Fire:
it is the first of the Five Agents.³⁶

男白女赤、金火相拘、則水定火、五行之初。

This poem ends as follows:

“Superior goodness is like water”³⁷
because it is flawless and clear.
These are the forms and images of the Dao,
but True Unity can hardly be charted:
it alters itself and distributes by parting,
and each part dwells alone, on its own.³⁸

上善若水、清而無瑕、道之形象、真一難圖、變而分布、各自獨居。

Once again, Water here represents the return of Qian and Kun to the state of Unity, the very instant in which a new life is generated. Subsequently, this Unity “alters itself and distributes by parting”: duality and multiplicity emerge, and life begins its course.

While the poem above describes the conception of the embryo, the next one is concerned with its gestation and birth:

Similar in kind to a hen's egg,
the white and the black tally with one another.
But one inch in size,
yet it is the beginning;
then the four limbs, the five viscera,
the sinews and bones join it.

be read as “Water conquers Fire; Fire conquers Metal,” etc.; at the end of the cycle, Soil conquers Water).

36 *Cantong qi* 55.

37 This verse is quoted from the *Daode jing* 8: “Superior goodness is like water. Water is good at giving benefit to the ten thousand things without contending and dwells in places that all people dislike; therefore, it is close to the Dao”; 上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，處眾人之所惡，故幾於道。

38 *Cantong qi* 55.

When ten months have elapsed,
it exits the womb.
“Its bones are weak” and are pliant,³⁹
its flesh is as smooth as lead.⁴⁰

類如雞子、白黑相符、縱橫一寸、以為始初、四肢五臟、筋骨乃俱、
彌歷十月、脫出其胞、骨弱可卷、肉滑若鉛。

The meaning of these verses is clear: the embryo, produced by the conjunction of Yin (the “black”) and Yang (the “white”), grows and finally comes to life.

As in several other instances, with the two poems seen above the *Cantong qi* has provided a model that the later tradition has applied to alchemy: Neidan commentators and authors have read in these verses a description of the generation of the Internal Elixir, represented as an “embryo” with its three stages of conception, gestation, and birth.⁴¹ The Neidan interpretation of these passages is a clear example of the application of a doctrine (the birth of the human being as founded on the same principles that govern the creation of the cosmos) to a particular cosmological science (the birth of the “embryo” in alchemy). This view is made possible by the analogies that exist among the creation of the cosmos, the generation of the human being, and the alchemical process. In the next section, we shall look at how the *Cantong qi* utilises these analogies in one of its poems, which is, this time, explicitly concerned with the Elixir.

5 Compounding the Elixir

The *Cantong qi* upholds and describes two ways of realisation. Borrowing two sentences from the *Daode jing*, it calls the two ways “superior virtue” (*shangde* 上德) and “inferior virtue” (*xiade* 下德):

- 39 This verse is partly quoted from the *Daode jing* 55: “Holding the fullness of virtue is being similar to an infant. [...] Its bones are weak, its sinews are yielding, but its grasp is tight”; 含德之厚比於赤子。[...] 骨弱筋柔而握固。
- 40 *Cantong qi* 56. In the last verse, the text of the *Cantong qi* at the basis of Yu Yan's 俞琰 commentary (1284), as well as later works that follow Yu Yan's text, has *yi* 飴 (“candy”) for *qian* 鉛 (“lead”); *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* 周易參同契發揮 (An Elucidation of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*; DZ 1005), 6.13a. In replacing *qian* 鉛 with *yi* 飴, Yu Yan follows a suggestion given earlier by Zhu Xi 朱熹 in his commentary (1197); *Zhouyi cantong qi* [kaoyi] 周易參同契 [考異] ([Investigation of Discrepancies in the] *Zhouyi cantong qi*; DZ 1001), 2.6a.
- 41 On this view, see the article by Catherine Despeux, “Symbolic Pregnancy and the Sexual Identity of Taoist Adepts,” in the present volume.

“Superior virtue has no doing”:
 it does not use examining and seeking.
 “Inferior virtue does”:
 its operation does not rest.⁴²

上德無為、不以察求、下德為之、其用不休。

In the way of “superior virtue,” the identity of the principle and its manifestation, or of the Dao and the “ten thousand things,” is immediately realised: as nothing needs to be sought or investigated, one maintains the state of “non-doing” (*wuwei* 無為). “Inferior virtue,” instead, is the way of “doing” (*youwei* 有為): seeking the hidden principle that gives birth to the cosmos, one uses the practice of alchemy as a support in order to attain that principle. This is the function of alchemy as a cosmological science.⁴³

In the conclusion of this chapter, I will return on some implications of this perspective on the overall view of the alchemical process. Here we should note that while alchemy, in all of its forms, pertains to the way of “inferior virtue,” for the *Cantong qi* it is the only cosmological science that can provide access to the higher state of realisation, as long as it is practiced in accordance with its principles: that is, as long as “doing” (inferior virtue) in due time gives way to “non-doing” (superior virtue). Therefore, having rejected practices of different nature (respiratory, meditational, sexual, and ritual, in section 26), as well as forms of alchemy that do not conform to its principles (in section 36), the *Cantong qi* presents its own alchemical model, which is distinguished by two main features. First, since the alchemical work begins from the state of multiplicity to lead one back to the state of Unity, it should reproduce the stages of the generation of the cosmos, but in a reverse sequence and in a gradual way, in order to reintegrate each stage into the one that gives birth to it. Second, the Elixir should incorporate not only the stages of the unfolding of Unity into multiplicity, but also the principles that determine and represent those stages: Qian, Kun, Kan, and Li.

As a consequence, according to the *Cantong qi*, the Elixir is compounded on the basis of two primary ingredients, which must be “of the same kind” (*tonglei*

42 *Cantong qi* 20. The first and the third verses of this stanza derive from *Daode jing* 38.

43 In the *Cantong qi*, the way of “superior virtue” is described in Book 1, sec. 18–27, and Book 2, sec. 53–61. The way of “inferior virtue” is described in Book 1, sec. 28–42, and Book 2, sec. 62–74. On this subject, see Pregadio 2011, 47–53, and my article, “Superior Virtue, Inferior Virtue: A Doctrinal Theme in the Works of the Daoist Master Liu Yiming (1734–1821),” in *T'oung Pao* 100 (2014).

同類) as Qian and Kun: if the primary ingredients are not in agreement with Qian and Kun, “could they ever want to be joined in one body?”⁴⁴ In the view of the *Cantong qi*, only True Lead (*zhenqian* 真鉛, Qian) and True Mercury (*zhenhong* 真汞, Kun) respond to this requirement and can represent and enact their conjunction. However, the starting point of the alchemical process cannot be provided by these ingredients, because no instance of Qian and Kun in their pure state is found within the cosmos: as we have seen, the essence of Qian ☰ is hidden within Kan ☵, and the essence of Kun ☷ is hidden within Li ☲. Accordingly, the two primary ingredients should be obtained from substances that in turn are “of the same kind” as Kan and Li. These two substances are “black lead” (native lead) and cinnabar, respectively.

Therefore, the first stage of the alchemical process consists of extracting True Lead from black lead, and True Mercury from cinnabar. In their symbolic functions, these four substances are equivalent to the emblems that represent the modes of the Dao as it generates the cosmos (Qian, Kun, Kan, Li), and to the four agents that return to the state of unity when a human being is conceived (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire). The four agents, however, are configured in a different way compared to what we have seen in the previous section, and for a clear reason: while the conception of a human being reenacts cosmogony on a microcosmic scale, here the intent is the opposite, namely to revert to the state prior to the beginning of the cosmogonic process. In other words, the purpose now is not reproducing cosmogony, but *reversing* the effects of cosmogony. The typical correspondences among these sets of emblems are as follows:

True Lead	Qian	☰	True Yang	Metal
True Mercury	Kun	☷	True Yin	Wood
black lead	Kan	☵	Yin	Water
cinnabar	Li	☲	Yang	Fire

These correspondences imply, for example, that when cinnabar yields True Mercury, Li ☲ releases its Yin essence and enables Kun ☷ to be restored; and when black lead produces True Lead, Kan ☵ similarly releases its essence and enables Qian ☰ to be restored. Another example pertains to the inversion of the “generation sequence” of the agents: Wood, which had generated and given its essence to Fire, is now generated by Fire, allowing True Yin to be restored; and Metal, which had generated and given its essence to Water, is now generated by Water, allowing True Yang to be restored. All these different

44 *Cantong qi* 36.

representations indicate the same idea: only after the two pure principles – Qian and Kun, True Yang and True Yin, Metal and Wood – are recovered can their conjunction take place.⁴⁵

It is not the task of a work like the *Cantong qi* to provide a detailed description of the alchemical method per se: as said above, the *Cantong qi* deals with alchemy only in order to present its main principles, and not to describe its practices. One of its three passages that concern the compounding of the Elixir, which I will briefly discuss below, illustrates this point.⁴⁶

In this poem, True Yin (Mercury) is called the Flowing Pearl of Great Yang (*taiyang liuzhu* 太陽流珠) because it derives from Yang (just like mercury derives from cinnabar), and True Yang (Lead) is called the Golden Flower (*jinhua* 金華).⁴⁷ Only True Yang, or lead, through its firm nature can control the volatile qualities of True Yin (exemplified by the fact that mercury volatilises when heated) and enable the two principles to join with one another:

The Flowing Pearl of Great Yang
desires ever to leave you.
When, at last, it finds the Golden Flower,
it turns about, and the two rely upon each other.⁴⁸

太陽流珠、常欲去人、卒得金華、轉而相因。

When the Golden Flower (Lead) is heated, it liquefies and can join with the Flowing Pearl (Mercury), which in turn will not escape and vanish. The two ingredients first take on a white colour (the colour of Metal, the agent corresponding to True Yang) and then coagulate into a dry amalgam, merging their natures (*xing* 性) and qualities (or dispositions, *qing* 情):

They transform into a white liquid,

45 In addition to those shown here, other associations between the four emblematic substances and the four agents are possible, depending on the specific representation of the alchemical process or of its stages. In particular, the two main ingredients of the Elixir are often represented by Water and Fire. See, for instance, *Cantong qi* 32.

46 The other two passages are found in poems 39–40 and 78, respectively. Several other poems of the *Cantong qi* concern principles at the basis of particular aspects of the alchemical work, such as the process of “inversion” (sec. 64 and 73) or the role of the Five Agents (sec. 32–33, 41, 63, 72, and 79).

47 More precisely, Flower of Metal; but “golden flower” has become the standard translation of the term *jinhua*.

48 *Cantong qi* 62.

coagulate and are perfectly solid.
 The Golden Flower is the first to sing:⁴⁹
 in the space of an instant
 it dissolves into water –
 horse-tooth and *langgan*.⁵⁰
 The Yang is next to join it:⁵¹
 qualities and natures are so of themselves.⁵²

化為白液、凝而至堅、金華先唱、有頃之間、解化為水、馬齒琅玕、
 陽乃往和、情性自然。

The amalgam is then pounded and placed in the tripod. Controlled and nurtured by fire, which should at first be as mild as a “loving mother” and then as vigorous as a “stern father,” the Flowing Pearl and the Golden Flower transmute themselves into the Golden Elixir:

Approach it forthwith,
 seize it and store it within the Forbidden Gates.⁵³
 The loving mother will nurture and nourish it,
 and the filial child will reward her with love;
 the stern father will issue orders,
 to teach and admonish his children and grandsons.⁵⁴

迫促時陰、拘畜禁門、慈母育養、孝子報恩、嚴父施令、教敕子孫。

- 49 *Xianchang* 先唱, literally translated as “is the first to sing,” means “to take the lead.”
- 50 *Langgan* 琅玕 is a mythical gemstone, said to be found on Mount Kunlun at the centre of the world. In his commentary, Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) explains that this verse of the *Cantong qi* describes the appearance of Metal: “Horse-tooth is a metaphor of its strength and whiteness, and *langgan* is a metaphor of its warmth and softness”; *Cantong zhizhi* 參同直指 (Straightforward Pointers on the *Cantong qi*), “Jingwen” 3.7a. Note, in addition, that the horse is associated with the dragon and thus represents the Yang principle (see note 17 above); and *chi* 齒 (“tooth”) is a synonym of *ya* 牙 and thus alludes to *huangya* 黃芽 (“yellow sprout”), another name for True Metal (True Yang).
- 51 “Yang,” as previously noted, refers in this poem to the Flowing Pearl of Great Yang, or mercury, and thus actually designates Yin.
- 52 *Cantong qi* 62.
- 53 “Forbidden Gates” (*jinmen* 禁門) alludes to the king’s or the emperor’s palace. According to the Waidan or the Neidan reading, this term refers either to the tripod, where the Elixir coagulates, or to the lower Cinnabar Field (*dantian* 丹田), in the region of the abdomen, where the “embryo” is conceived.
- 54 *Cantong qi* 62.

The role performed by the male and the female principles in generating the Elixir reappears here under another shape: the “stern father” and the “loving mother” are Qian and Kun, respectively, which govern the alchemical work illustrated in the *Cantong qi*.

Conclusion: “Inverting the Course” and “Following the Course”

The cosmogonic stages distinguished by using space and time as metaphors occur in a spaceless place and a timeless instant. From this perspective, the relative domain, defined by space and time, does not even exist. From the perspective of the last of those stages, we can instead look backwards, or rather upwards, and distinguish several stages that occur in sequence. This perspective emphasises the feminine aspect of the Dao, in accordance with this statement from the *Daode jing*: “One can say that it is the mother of Heaven and Earth; I do not know its name, but call it Dao.”⁵⁵

As the purpose of alchemy is inverting those stages in order to return to the state prior to their inception, one issue inevitably emerges: Does the intention to trace the stages of cosmogony in a backward sequence imply a rejection of the “generative” or “maternal” aspect of the Dao? The answer to this question involves considering the function of alchemy as a cosmological science. Inverting the process of cosmogony requires erasing, one after the other, the series of generative stages that lead from Non-Being to multiplicity. Yet, in the forms of External and Internal Alchemy based on the model of the *Cantong qi*, the alchemical process is represented not as the elimination, but as the inversion, of the generative sequence: modelling itself on the principles that enable the Dao to manifest itself, alchemy reproduces the stages of cosmogony so that each stage gives birth not to the next one, but to the previous one. This feature is especially emphasised in Internal Alchemy, where practitioners invest themselves with the task of “regenerating” their own persons and the world. The regressive process of inversion, therefore, is also a progressive process of creation: the conception, gestation, and birth of an “embryo,” which is the Elixir itself. Not only do the two processes run parallel to one another but they are also ultimately equivalent.⁵⁶

55 可以為天地母。吾不知其名，字之曰道；*Daode jing* 25.

56 Analogous simultaneous sequences also occur in different forms of Taoist ritual; see Schipper and Wang, “Progressive and Regressive Time Cycles in Taoist Ritual,” in J.T. Fraser, N. Lawrence, and F.C. Haber, eds., *Time, Science, and Society in China and the West* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

The same coexistence of creation and its inversion is also visible in another, more important respect. In Internal Alchemy, the backward movement of “inverting the course” (*ni* 逆) is, in fact, an upward movement that leads from the cosmos to the Dao; this movement intends to compensate for the downward movement of “going along the course” (*shun* 順), through which the Dao generates the cosmos.⁵⁷ While the movement of inversion is indispensable, it is only one part of the path of realisation envisaged in the *Cantong qi*. In one of its best-known passages, the *Cantong qi* refers to this point by saying:

Metal is the mother of Water –
the mother is hidden in the embryo of her son.
Water is the child of Metal –
the child is stored in the womb of its mother.⁵⁸

金為水母、母隱子胎、水為金子、子藏母胞。

The first two lines of this poem represent the return to the origin of the cosmos – which is the purpose of alchemy per se – as the inversion of the generative sequence of the Five Agents. When Metal (☰) generates Water (☵), its essence (True Yang) moves within Water: it is now the “embryo” found in Water. Thus, in order to liberate this essence, which is the seed of the Elixir, the son must give birth to his mother: the son (Water) becomes the mother, and the mother (Metal) becomes the son. In Internal Alchemy, this is what the practitioner does as he becomes the “mother” of his own embryo, which is conceived in the first stage of the practice by refining the True Yang essence and is, in fact, that essence. The next stages of the practice lead from conception to birth: the embryo is nourished until it is finally “delivered” as the Yang Spirit (*yangshen* 陽神, or Qian ☰). This is the culmination of the upward movement of “inverting the course.”

Alchemy in the strict sense of the term deals only with this upward movement, which is the way of “inferior virtue.” Here, in fact, is where Internal Alchemy enjoins a practitioner to “know when to stop” (*zhizhi* 知止) or “know what is sufficient” (*zhizu* 知足),⁵⁹ and to shift to “non-doing.” Complying with its boundaries as a cosmological science, alchemy acknowledges that its function

57 On the concepts of *shun* and *ni* in Internal Alchemy, see Ge Guolong 戈国龙, *Daojiao neidanxue tanwei* 道教內丹學探微 (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2004): 47–70.

58 *Cantong qi* 23.

59 These expressions also derive from the *Daode jing* 44 (“Know what is sufficient and you will not be disgraced; know when to stop and you will not be in danger”; 知足不辱、知

is fulfilled: by working on the correspondences and the analogies between cosmos and human being, the practice of compounding the Elixir – or of giving birth to the “embryo” – has guided the practitioner along the upward way to the origins of the process through which the cosmos is generated.

The alchemical work, however, is entirely accomplished only if the course is completed by performing the opposite movement of descent through “non-doing.” In the other two lines of the *Cantong qi* poem translated above, this new downward movement is represented by the ordinary generative sequence of the Five Agents: now Metal (the mother) once again generates Water (the son). After the first part of the alchemical work has been completed, and the alchemist has regenerated himself, he should redescend to the domain from which he had departed. The Pure Yang attained by the alchemical practice is now projected onto the Yin of the cosmos, which, at the same time, moderates and tempers its Yang nature. This movement, which is the way of “superior virtue,” realises the unity and identity of Dao and cosmos, Absolute and relative, Unity and multiplicity, constancy and change.

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止不殆), and 46 (“There is no calamity greater than not knowing what is sufficient”; 禍莫大於不知足).

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