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Superior Virtue, Inferior Virtue: A Doctrinal Theme in the Works of the Daoist Master Liu Yiming (1734–1821)

Fabrizio Pregadio*

(Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen–Nürnberg)

Abstract

The Daoist master Liu Yiming (1734–1821) frequently mentions “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue” (*shangde* and *xiade*) in his works. In his view, these terms define two aspects, or degrees, of Neidan (Internal Alchemy), respectively focused on “non-doing” (*wuwei*) and “doing” (*youwei*), and concerned with the cultivation of Nature (*xing*) and Existence (*ming*). This article presents Liu Yiming’s main writings on this subject and their background. Originally formulated in the *Daodejing* and first applied to alchemy in the *Cantong qi*, the distinction between the two types of “virtue” also reflects the history of the Neidan tradition and in particular the development of practices of self-cultivation that emphasize the “conjoined cultivation of Nature and Existence” (*xingming shuangxiu*).

Résumé

Le maître taoïste Liu Yiming (1734–1821) mentionne fréquemment la “vertu supérieure” et la “vertu inférieure” (*shangde* et *xiade*) dans ses œuvres. Pour lui, ces termes définissent deux aspects, ou degrés, du Neidan (alchimie interne), centrés respectivement sur le “non-faire” et le “faire” et s’attachant à cultiver la nature (*xing*) et l’existence (*ming*). Cet article présente les principaux écrits de Liu Yiming sur le sujet ainsi que leur arrière-plan. Formulée à l’origine dans le *Daodejing* et appliquée pour la première fois à l’alchimie dans le *Cantong qi*, la distinction entre ces deux types de “vertu” reflètent également l’histoire de la tradition Neidan et plus

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particulièrement le développement de pratiques de culture du soi mettant l'accent sur la “culture conjointe de la nature et de l'existence” (*xingming shuangxiu*).

Keywords

Liu Yiming, Daoism, Neidan, Internal Alchemy, *Daode jing*, *Cantong qi*, Beizong, Nanzong

In several works belonging to his extensive literary corpus, the Daoist master Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821) discusses two aspects of Neidan 內丹, or Internal Alchemy, respectively called *shangde* 上德 (“superior virtue”) and *xiade* 下德 (“inferior virtue”). According to Liu, superior virtue focuses on the cultivation of *xing* 性, or inner nature, while inferior virtue focuses on the cultivation of *ming* 命, a term that in its broadest sense denotes one's embodiment and the destiny, or “mandate,” assigned by Heaven to one's existence. Although these two aspects, or degrees, of Neidan are addressed to and accessible by different types of adepts, Liu Yiming emphasizes that, if the path of inferior virtue is fully achieved, it leads to the same state of realization as the path of superior virtue.

This article surveys the teachings of Liu Yiming on this subject and their background. As we shall see, substantially equivalent views on these two aspects of Neidan are also expounded by earlier masters, even when they refer to them using terms different from “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue.” In addition, the view that Neidan comprises two aspects, or degrees, is closely connected to the historical development of this tradition: after the creation of the Northern and the Southern lineages (Beizong 北宗 and Nanzong 南宗), some masters associated the two “virtues” with their emblematic modes of self-cultivation, respectively focused on *xing* and *ming*. From this point of view, Liu Yiming gathers ideas transmitted within the earlier Neidan tradition, but he formulates them in a more articulate way, especially with regard to the roles played by “non-doing” and “doing” (*wuwei* 無為 and *youwei* 有為) in the Neidan practices, and to the doctrinal distinction between the precelestial and postcelestial domains (*xiantian* 先天 and *houtian* 後天).

In addition to his little-known commentary to the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), the main sources of the present study

are found in Liu Yiming's *Daoshu shier zhong* 道書十二種 (Twelve Books on the Dao). This collection represents one of the main instances of an integral exposition of doctrines in the history of Neidan. Born in Quwo 曲沃 district, Pingyang 平陽 prefecture (present-day Linfen 臨汾, Shanxi), Liu Yiming was an eleventh-generation master of one of the northern branches of the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage. Having recovered from severe illness in his youth, he began extended traveling that led him to meet his two main masters, whom he calls the Old Man of the Kangu Valley (Kangu Laoren 龜谷老人), met in 1760 or slightly earlier, and the Great Man Resting in Immortality (Xianliu Zhangren 仙留丈人), met in 1772. In 1780, Liu visited the Qiyun 棲雲 mountains in Jincheng 金城 (present-day Yuzhong 榆中, Gansu) and settled there. From then on and until his death he devoted himself to teaching and writing. The *Daoshu shier zhong* contains his best-known works, mainly consisting of commentaries on major Neidan scriptures and of other writings on Neidan. In addition, Liu wrote commentaries to Daoist and Buddhist texts, as well as texts on ophthalmology, a subject that he had studied in his youth.¹

Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue in the *Daodejing*

The starting point of the Neidan discourse on superior virtue and inferior virtue is a passage in the *Daodejing*, sec. 38, which defines the difference between the two kinds of “virtue” as follows:

¹ For additional information on Liu Yiming's works, see note 42 below. The main studies on Liu are Liu Ning 劉寧, *Liu Yiming xiudao sixiang yanjiu* 劉一明修道思想研究 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2001); Liu Zhongyu 劉仲宇, *Liu Yiming xue'an* 劉一明學案 (Ji'nan: Qi Lu shushe, 2010); and Jia Laisheng 賈來生, *Tiejian daoyi: Liu Yiming dazhuan* 鐵肩道義 — 劉一明大傳 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011). A general introduction to Liu Yiming's views on Neidan is found in my “Discriminations in Cultivating the Tao: Liu Yiming (1734–1821) and His *Xiuzhen houbian*,” forthcoming in *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*. On ophthalmology, see Li Yingcun 李應存 et al., “Qingdai Longshang zhuming daoyi Liu Yiming zhuanlüe ji yishu gaiyao” 清代隴上著名道醫劉一明傳略及醫書概要, *Xibu Zhongyiyaoyao* 西部中醫藥 26.5 (2013): 49–51. In the present article, references to works found in the *Daoshu shier zhong* are to the reprint in *Zangwai daoshu* 藏外道書, vol. 8; this reproduces a 1990 publication (Beijing: Zhongguo Zhongyiyaoyao chubanshe), which in turn mostly consists of a reprint of the 1880 Yihua tang 翼化堂 edition. Quotations of texts found in the Daoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏) include the number they are assigned in Kristofer Schipper, *Concordance du Tao-tsang* (Paris: EFEO, 1975), preceded by the abbreviation “DZ.”

Superior virtue is not virtuous,
thus it has virtue;
inferior virtue does not lack virtue,
thus it has no virtue.
Superior virtue has no doing—
there is nothing whereby it does;
inferior virtue does—
there is something whereby it does.

上德不德，是以有德，下德不失德，是以無德。上德無為，而無以為，下德為之，而有以為。

This passage, which in early copies of the *Daode jing* opened the whole text,²⁾ has been interpreted and translated in different ways—in particular, by understanding its main subject not only as “virtue” per se, but also as “the man” or “the person” of superior or inferior virtue, and by rendering *de* 德 as “power,” “potency,” “integrity,” and in other ways. While these different readings and translations should not be overlooked, with regard to our present subject “virtue” defines, in this passage, two types of inner attainment and outer operation (or “efficacy,” *gong* 功). Superior virtue “has virtue” because “it is not virtuous”: it does not intentionally pursue virtue and does not intend to comply with any set model of virtue. This virtue “does nothing” and—a point especially important for our present subject—“there is nothing whereby it does”: one uses nothing in order to seek or display virtue. Inferior virtue, in contrast, “has no virtue” because “it does not lack virtue”: it deliberately seeks and displays virtuous attainment and operation, and this requires intentional action. This virtue “does” and “there is something whereby it does”: one uses something in order to attain or exhibit virtuous behavior. The concept of “using nothing” or “using something” is important in the Neidan views of superior and inferior virtue. As we shall see, according to Liu Yiming, in inferior virtue one “borrows the postcelestial in order to return to the precelestial,” while in superior virtue one only “cultivates the precelestial in order to transform the postcelestial.”

What the *Daode jing* means by “doing” is exemplified in the next sentences of this passage, which concern three main types of ordinary

²⁾ Sec. 38 is found at the beginning of the “De” 德 portion of the text, which is placed before the “*Dao*” 道 portion in both Mawangdui manuscripts, dating from ca. 200 BCE or slightly later.

virtue, namely benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), and propriety (*li* 禮). The sentences on benevolence and righteousness deserve attention, as Liu Yiming will refer to them in one of his writings on superior and inferior virtue. The *Daode jing* says:

Superior benevolence does—
there is nothing whereby it does;
superior righteousness does—
there is something whereby it does.

上仁為之，而無以為。上義為之，而有以為。

Even in their “superior” (*shang* 上) forms, both benevolence and righteousness are forms of “doing,” but they differ from one another with regard to their means and ends. Benevolence has “nothing whereby it does”: it is performed intentionally, but neither because of something nor as a means to obtain something. Righteousness, instead, has “something whereby it does”: it is performed with a motive and for a purpose. As for the third type of virtue, namely propriety, it is the lowest one:

Superior propriety does—if no one responds to it,
it rolls up its sleeves and attacks them.
上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。

Propriety—the standards that regulate relations among members of society, especially according to their hierarchical status—expects an appropriate response from the others; if this response does not come, says the *Daode jing*, it makes a show of strength (“rolls up its sleeves”) and forces compliance to the rules.

This part of *Daode jing* 38 is concluded by a well-known passage:

Therefore after the Dao is lost there is virtue,
after virtue is lost there is benevolence,
after benevolence is lost there is righteousness,
after righteousness is lost there is propriety.
故失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。

As its words make clear, this final passage describes a sequence of progressively declining stages, through which operating in accordance with

the highest principle—the Dao—is replaced with lower types of virtue, based on adherence to ethical or to conventional rules of behavior.

Much more should be said about this section of the *Daode jing*—in particular, about its evident criticism of dominant, “Confucian” models of virtue, and about the multiple senses of the word *de* 德.³ Let it suffice to say here that, in the context of the *Daode jing* and of certain later Daoist traditions, *de* denotes in the first place the unlimited potentiality of the Dao, and especially its faculty to manifest or not manifest itself as well as its mode of operation in manifestation—for example, generating, nourishing, and equalizing the “ten thousand things” (*Daode jing* 34, 51, 77, etc.). In all these cases, the single principle that the Dao can be said to follow is “being so of its own” (*ziran* 自然, 25), a principle that it fulfills by “not doing” (34, 37, 73). The saints (or sages, *shengren* 聖人) and the realized persons (*zhenren* 真人) model their operation on the operation of the Dao, and thus share, within the limits imposed by the domain in which they operate, the same unlimited potentiality. This is the “mysterious *de*” (*xuande* 玄德), an expression that the *Daode jing* applies—using exactly the same words—both to the Dao (51) and to those who operate in complete accordance with it (10):

Generating without owning,
doing without depending,
letting grow without managing;
this is called Mysterious Virtue.
生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。

To summarize what we have seen above and to return to our present subject, two main points deserve attention. The first is that the *Daode jing* defines superior and inferior virtue in relation to “non-doing” and “doing,” respectively. The second point is that the way of “non-doing”

³) On this subject, see Scott A. Barnwell, “The Evolution of the Concept of *De* 德 in Early China,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* 235 (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, 2013), especially 37 ff. on the *Daode jing*. While “virtue” is by no means an accurate rendering of *de*, this translation does offer the advantage of using a single term to render *de* whether—to use the examples given by A.C. Graham—it is meant in the sense of “virtue is its own reward” or of “the virtue of cyanide is to poison.” See Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), 13. Graham usually translated *de* as “potency.”

does not use—and does not require—anything in order to be fulfilled (“there is nothing whereby it does”). The way of “doing,” instead, involves using “something” as a means and with intention (“there is something whereby it does”). An analogous distinction between “non-doing” and “doing” is also at the basis of the discourse about superior and inferior virtue in Neidan.

“Non-Doing” and “Doing”: The Two Ways of the *Cantong qi*

The *Daode jing* has been the object of commentaries by several authors of Neidan works. In addition to Liu Yiming, whose notes on *Daode jing* 38 will be discussed below, these authors include Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (1194–1229?), Li Daochun 李道純 (late thirteenth century), He Daoquan 何道全 (1319?–1399), Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520–1601 or 1606), and Huang Yuanji 黃元吉 (mid-nineteenth century). None of them, however, relates the two types of “virtue” mentioned in *Daode jing* 38 to Neidan. The reason appears to be clear: in the way of seeing of these and other masters, explaining the *Daode jing* in light of Neidan would be impossible. Only the opposite procedure is practicable, as it is the *Daode jing* that provides elements of doctrine, which Neidan applies within its own domain.⁴

With regard to our present subject, the model for the application of doctrinal principles of the *Daode jing* to Neidan has been provided by the *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (Seal of the Unity of the Three, in Accordance with the *Book of Changes*; hereafter *Cantong qi*), a work that

⁴⁾ For these authors' comments on *Daode jing* 38, see Bai Yuchan, *Daode baozhang* 道德寶章 (The Precious Stanzas of *The Way and Its Virtue*), *Chongkan Daozang jiyao* 重刊道藏輯要 ed., 2.1a-b; Li Daochun, *Daode huiyuan* 道德會元 (Comprehending the Origin of *The Way and Its Virtue*; DZ 699), 2.1a-b; He Daoquan, *Taishang Laozi Daode jing shuzhu* 太上老子道德經述注 (Commentary on the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue* by the Most High Laozi), rpt. of early Ming edition in *Daozang jinghua* 道藏精華, vol. 15.4, 2.1a–3b; Lu Xixing, *Daode jing xuanlan* 道德經玄覽 (Looking Through the Mysteries of the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*), in *Fanghu waishi* 方壺外史 (The External Secretary of Mount Fanghu), rpt. of 1915 edition in *Daozang jinghua*, vol. 2.8, 335–37; and Huang Yuanji, *Daode jing jingyi* 道德經精義 (The Essential Meaning of the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*), rpt. of early twentieth-century edition in *Zangwai daoshu*, vol. 22, 2.18b–21a. Huang Yuanji describes Neidan as a method for inverting the decline process described in *Daode jing* 38, but he does not distinguish between two aspects or degrees of Neidan related to superior and inferior virtue. On Liu Yiming's commentary, see note 42 below.

in turn has contributed the foundations of most forms and lineages of Daoist alchemy. Section 20 of the *Cantong qi* is directly inspired by *Daode jing* 38 and includes two of its sentences:

“Superior virtue has no doing”:
it does not use examining and seeking.
“Inferior virtue does”:
its operation does not rest.⁵
上德無為，不以察求，下德為之，其用不休。

Notwithstanding their brevity, these verses play a major function in the doctrines of the *Cantong qi*. They concern the two ways of realization upheld by this work: the first is the way of “non-doing,” canonized in the *Daode jing*, and the second, the way of “doing,” which is alchemy in the form canonized by the *Cantong qi* itself—the conjunction of True Yang and True Yin, respectively represented by Lead and Mercury. Following the *Daode jing*, the *Cantong qi* calls these two ways “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue,” respectively. With principles of metaphysics and cosmology formulated mainly on the basis of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), these two ways are the main subjects of the *Cantong qi*.⁶

In the entire *Cantong qi*, the portions concerned with the way of “non-doing” are those that contain the largest number of quotations from, or allusions to, the *Daode jing*.⁷ In particular, the main description

⁵) Quotations of the *Cantong qi* in this article are drawn from my translation in *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, vol. 1: *A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi* (Mountain View, Cal.: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), and follow its numbering of sections. The base text is the Jinling shufang 金陵書房 (1484) edition of Chen Zhixu's 陳致虛 (1290-ca. 1368) *Zhouyi cantong qi zhujie* 周易參同契注解, which is also available, under this or different titles, in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要, and in several other editions.

⁶) The three subjects are reflected in the title of the *Cantong qi* and are mentioned in its verses. In sec. 84, the *Cantong qi* refers to the *Yijing*, the Daoist teachings, and alchemy (“the work with the fire of the furnace”), and then states: “These three Ways stem from one, / and together yield one path.” In sec. 87, the author of the *Cantong qi* adds: “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.”

⁷) Each of the first two Books (*pian* 篇) of the *Cantong qi* deals, in sequence, with the three subjects mentioned above. In particular, superior virtue, and its difference from inferior virtue, is the general subject of sections 18–27 in Book 1, and sections 53–61 in Book 2. On the composition and the contents of the *Cantong qi* see Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, vol. 1, 2–5 and 28–31.

of the state of superior virtue (found in sec. 18) draws two other sentences from the *Daode jing*:

Innerly nourish yourself,
serene and quiescent (*jing*) in empty Non-Being (*xuwu*).
Going back to the fundament (*yuanben*) conceal your brightness (*ming*),
and innerly illuminate your body.
“Shut the openings”
and raise and strengthen the Numinous Trunk;
as the three luminaries sink into the ground,
warmly nourish the Pearl.
“Watching, you do not see it”—
it is nearby and easy to seek.⁸
內以養己，安靜虛無，原本隱明，內照形軀，閉塞其兌，築固靈株，三
光陸沈，溫養子珠，視之不見，近而易求。

The subjects of the first stanza are the same as those of another exemplary passage of the *Daode jing* (sec. 16):

Attain the ultimate of emptiness (*xu*),
guard the utmost of quiescence (*jing*)....
Reverting to the root (*guigen*) is called quiescence,
and this is called returning to the mandate;
returning to the mandate is called constancy;
knowing constancy is called brightness (*ming*).
致虛極，守靜篤 … 歸根曰靜，是謂復命，復命曰常，知常曰明。

Both this passage of the *Daode jing* and the first stanza of the *Cantong qi* poem quoted above mention the state of Emptiness (*xu* 虛, or “empty Non-Being,” *xuwu* 虛無), the return to the root (*gen* 根, or the “fundament,” *ben* 本), the achievement of quiescence (*jing* 靜), and the luminous (*ming* 明) quality of those who attain that state. In the view of the *Cantong qi*, “nourishing oneself” is equivalent to closing the “openings” (*dui* 兌, a term also found in *Daode jing* 52 and 56: “shut the openings, close the gates”). In the passage quoted above, these openings are understood as the “three luminaries” (*sanguang* 三光), namely, the eyes,

⁸⁾ “Shut the openings” derives from *Daode jing* 52 and 56. “Watching, you do not see it” derives from *Daode jing* 14.

the ears, and the mouth, or the functions of sight, hearing, and speech.⁹ When the “three luminaries” invert their light and illuminate inwardly, they “sink into the ground.” This expression, derived from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子,¹⁰ denotes the attitude of the saintly persons who conceal their sainthood: maintaining themselves in the state of non-doing, they contemplate the arising of all phenomena from Emptiness and their return to it. This attitude, and nothing else, constitutes the way of superior virtue and the realized state according to the *Cantong qi*. No further pursuit is necessary: the Dao is invisible (“watching, you do not see it,” *Daode jing* 14) but is “nearby and easy to seek”¹¹

The main description of inferior virtue in the *Cantong qi* (sec. 22), instead, concerns the principles of alchemy. This poem opens with another line quoted from the *Daode jing*:

“Know the white, keep to the black,”
and the Numinous Light will come of its own.¹²
知白守黑，神明自來。

When the terms “black” (Yin) and “white” (Yang) are applied to alchemy, they are related to three sets of emblems: the five agents (*wuxing* 五行), the eight trigrams of the *Yijing*, and the alchemical emblems proper. In this reading, “black” refers to the agent Water, to the external Yin lines of Kan ䷜, and to native lead; and “white” refers to the agent Metal, to the internal Yang line of Kan, and to True Lead. Therefore Water, signifying obscurity, the north, the color black, and “black lead,” hides the pure

⁹) See also *Cantong qi*, sec. 58, which refers to the “three luminaries” as the “three treasures” (*sanbao* 三寶), saying: “Ears, eyes, and mouth are the three treasures: shut them, and let nothing pass through.”

¹⁰) “[The saint, *shengren*,] has buried himself among the people, hidden himself among the fields. . . . Perhaps he finds himself at odds with the age and in his heart disdains to go along with it. This is called ‘sinking into the ground.’” *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 25.895; translation from Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), 285–86, slightly modified.

¹¹) Other poems of the *Cantong qi* that describe superior virtue are concerned, in particular, with the origins of individual existence (sections 53–56), the state of the realized persons (*zhenren*, 58–60, including their breathing, see note 35 below), and a criticism of practices that are deemed to be inadequate for true realization (26–27).

¹²) “Know the white, keep to the black” derives from *Daode jing* 28.

Yang principle (the “numinous light,” *shenming* 神明) sought by the alchemist. This principle, which is the True Lead, is called Golden Flower (or Metal Flower, *jinhua* 金華) in the final verses of the same poem, where we find one more expression drawn from the *Daode jing*:

That is why lead is black on the outside
but cherishes the Golden Flower within,
like the man who “wears rough-hewn clothes but cherishes a piece of jade in his
bosom,”
and outwardly behaves like a fool.¹³
故鉛外黑，內懷金華，被褐懷玉，外為狂夫。

Several other poems of the *Cantong qi* describe different aspects of inferior virtue.¹⁴ Especially important, however, are the passages concerned with the distinction between superior and inferior virtue. In one of these passages (sec. 21) we read:

Closed above, its name is Being;
closed below, its name is Non-Being.
Non-Being therefore rises above,
for above is the dwelling of the virtue of Spirit.
上閉則稱有，下閉則稱無，無者以奉上，上有神德居。

In this quatrain, Qian and Kun signify the precelestial domain (*xiantian*). Qian (Heaven) is above and represents the principle of Non-Being (*wu* 無); Kun (Earth) is below and represents the principle of Being (*you* 有). As they join to one another, Qian ☰ becomes Li ☰ and Kun ☷ becomes Kan ☷. The conjunction of Qian and Kun gives origin to the post-celestial domain (*houtian*). Here Li (Fire) dwells above and Kan (Water) dwells below. Li encloses the principle of Being, represented by its inner line that originally belongs to Kun; Kan encloses the principle of Non-Being, represented by its inner line that originally belongs to Qian.

While this appears to be a process of symmetrical differentiation, there is a significant distinction between what is “above” and what is

¹³⁾ The words translated within quotation marks derive from *Daode jing* 70, where they refer, again, to the saintly man (*shengren*) who hides his saintliness.

¹⁴⁾ These poems concern, in particular, the main aspects of the alchemical method (sections 39–40, 62), the function of Lead and Mercury (28–29, 68), the principle of “inversion” (64, 73), and a criticism of erroneous alchemical practices (36, 65).

“below.” Above, Non-Being embraces Being. Discerning this is the way of superior virtue: as nothing needs to be sought, one resides in the state of “non-doing.” Below, Non-Being is enclosed within Being. The hidden principle demands to be recovered: this principle is represented by the inner line of Kan, which should rise again above, where Spirit dwells, in order to reconstitute Qian. Allowing this to occur requires “doing” and is the alchemical way of inferior virtue.

This poem is concluded by the following verses:

These are the methods of the two cavities:
 Metal and Breath thus wait upon one another.
 此兩孔穴法，金氣以相胥。

The way of superior virtue centers on the “cavity” of Li ☰, the Breath of Water (*shuiqi* 水氣) that originally belongs to Kun. The way of inferior virtue centers on the “cavity” of Kan ☷, the Essence of Metal (*jinjing* 金精) that originally belongs to Qian. As the *Cantong* *qi* upholds both ways, it is concerned with the “two cavities” of Li and Kan.

Another short poem dealing with the same subject (sec. 23) contains one of the passages of the *Cantong* *qi* most frequently quoted in later Neidan literature. The poem concerns two movements, opposite but in fact complementary and necessary to one another, between the precelestial and the postcelestial domains. As we shall see, these two movements are another major subject in the Neidan discourse on superior and inferior virtue. The poem says:

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.
 金為水母，母隱子胎，水為金子，子藏母胞。

Here the precelestial domain is represented by Metal, and the postcelestial domain by Water. The first movement is the ascent from the postcelestial to the precelestial, described as the inversion of the generative sequence (*xiangsheng* 相生) of the five agents. In this sequence, Metal (the “mother”) generates Water (the “son”), but in the alchemical process it is Water (black lead) that generates Metal (True Lead). The son

generates the mother, and thus “the mother is hidden in the embryo of her son.” The second movement is the new descent from the precelestial to the postcelestial, which occurs after the first movement has been completed. In this movement, represented as the ordinary course of the generative sequence of the five agents, Metal (the “mother”) once again generates Water (the “son”). Thus “the child is stored in the womb of its mother.”

The ascent to the precelestial and the return to the postcelestial correspond to inferior and superior virtue, respectively. They also correspond to different degrees of realization. The first one pertains to the movement of “ascent” performed by means of the alchemical work, which leads from the postcelestial to the precelestial. The second one—which completes the process begun in the first stage—pertains to the movement of “descent” and realizes the unity and identity of the precelestial and the postcelestial. When it is seen in this perspective, alchemy, in the strict sense of the term, deals only with the first movement: the reversion from the postcelestial to the precelestial, which requires “doing.” Its path, however, is fulfilled when the second movement is also performed: the return from the precelestial to the postcelestial, which is achieved by “non-doing.” For this reason, as we shall see, later Neidan masters, including Liu Yiming, will say that the focus of inferior virtue is the precelestial domain, while the focus of superior virtue is the postcelestial domain.

Neidan Modes of Doctrine and Practice

The extant commentaries of the *Cantong qi* written between the tenth and thirteenth centuries interpret the first poem on superior and inferior virtue translated above (sec. 20) in purely alchemical terms: they do not read the two types of virtue as related to two distinct modes of self-cultivation, and instead explain them as concerning the alchemical practice per se.¹⁵ Yet, several commentators interpret that poem in light of the functions performed in the alchemical work by Water and Fire,

¹⁵⁾ On these commentaries, and on other texts related to the *Cantong qi* written between the Tang and the Yuan periods, see Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, vol. 2: *Bibliographic Studies on the Cantong qi: Commentaries, Essays, and Related Works*, 111–57.

which, in one of their multiple senses, are instances of “non-doing” (quiescence, *jīng* 靜, Yin) and of “doing” (movement, *dōng* 動, Yang), respectively. In particular, according to Peng Xiao 彭曉 (whose commentary dates from 947), superior virtue refers to Water, which “is above and constantly in quiescence,” while inferior virtue refers to Fire, which “is below and constantly in movement.” Chen Xianwei 陳顯微 (1234) gives a more elaborate, but substantially analogous explanation. For both Chu Yong 儲泳 (ca. 1230) and the author of an anonymous Neidan commentary (written after 1208) preserved only in the Daoist Canon, “superior” and “inferior” refer to the positions of Li 禮 (Fire, the heart) and Kan 漏 (Water, the kidneys) within the human being. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1107) suggests, instead, that “superior” refers to the Yin principle, which is above, and “inferior” refers to the Yang principle, which is below: these again are the positions of Water and Fire, respectively, during the heating of the Elixir.¹⁶

The explanation given by Yu Yan 俞琰 (1284) is closer to the later understanding of superior and inferior virtue in Neidan. Drawing an expression from the *Zhuangzi*, Yu Yan understands superior virtue as the state in which Spirit (*shen* 神) is guarded “above”: “Silent and soundless, it has nothing to do.” Quoting the *Daode jing*, instead, he explains inferior virtue as the cycling of Breath (*qi* 氣), which begins “below” and proceeds upwards: “Continuous and unceasing, its operation never wears out.” This means, once again, that superior virtue is the way of “non-doing” (“it has nothing to do”), while inferior virtue is the way of “doing” (“its operation never wears out”).¹⁷

¹⁶) See Peng Xiao, *Zhouyi cantong qifenzhang tong zhenyi* 周易參同契分章通真義 (True Meaning of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*, with a Subdivision into Sections; DZ 1002), 1.16a-b; Chen Xianwei, *Zhouyi cantong qi jie* 周易參同契解 (Explication of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*; DZ 1007), 1.18a-b; Chu Yong, *Zhouyi cantong qi* (DZ 1008), 1.8a-b; anonymous, *Zhouyi cantong qi zhu* 周易參同契注 (Commentary on the *Zhouyi cantong qi*; DZ 1000), 1.14b-15a; and Zhu Xi, *Zhouyi cantong qi [kaoyi]* 周易參同契〔考異〕 ([Investigation of Discrepancies in the] *Zhouyi cantong qi*; DZ 1001), 1.9b-10b.

¹⁷) *Zhouyi cantong qifahui* 周易參同契發揮 (Elucidation of the *Cantong qi*; DZ 1005), 3.1a. “Silent and soundless” (*momo* 默默) derives from *Zhuangzi*, 11.381. “Continuous and unceasing, its operation never wears out” derives from *Daodejing* 6. The cycling of Breath in Neidan begins from the point represented by *zi* 子 (the coccyx), rises along the back of the body to the point represented by *wu* 午 (the upper Cinnabar Field, *dantian* 丹田), and then redescends along the front of the body to the lower Cinnabar Field. On Yu Yan’s commentary to the *Cantong qi* see Zeng Chuanhui 曾傳輝, *Yuandai Cantong xue: yi Yu Yan, Chen Zhixu*

While all commentators mentioned above—with the exception of Zhu Xi, whose interpretation is largely cosmological—read the *Cantong qi* in light of Neidan, none of them was affiliated with the two major Neidan lineages that were established by the thirteenth century.¹⁸ After the creation of the Beizong 北宗 (Northern Lineage) and the Nanzong 南宗 (Southern Lineage), emphasis in the Neidan discourse on superior and inferior virtue centers on two emblematic modes of self-cultivation, respectively based on *xing* (Nature) and *ming* (Existence), and on their integration with one another. A brief summary of the principles at the basis of their practices may serve to introduce the following sections of the present study.¹⁹

The first mode of self-cultivation places emphasis on *xing* (one's inner Nature, seen as innately perfected and as equivalent to the Buddha-Nature, *foxing* 佛性) and focuses on practices aiming to purify one's mind (“emptying the mind” or *xuxin* 虛心, “extinguishing the mind” or *miexin* 滅心, and “having no thoughts” or *wunian* 無念) in order to let one's self-realized Nature manifest itself. While the underlying doctrines—in particular, the doctrine of “seeing one's Nature” (*jianxing* 見性)—make use of Buddhist concepts and terms, in this mode of self-cultivation the immediate (*dun* 頓) realization of one's Nature is equivalent to attaining the Elixir: according to a statement attributed to Wang Zhe 王轍 (Wang Chongyang 王重陽, 1113–70), “the original True Nature is called Golden Elixir.”²⁰ This view is the main point in common with

wei li 元代參同學——以俞琰、陳致虛為例 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2001).

¹⁸ This includes Yu Yan, even though in his very learned *Cantong qi* commentary and in other works he repeatedly quotes texts belonging to both lineages. Yu Yan, who came from present-day Jiangsu, acknowledges an influence of the Southern Lineage of Neidan, but he does not reveal the name of his master. See Zeng Chuanhui, *Yuandai Cantong xue*, 42–43.

¹⁹ The main survey of Neidan in a Western language that takes account of the points summarized below, placing them in both a historical and a doctrinal perspective, is the study by Yokote Yutaka, “Daoist Internal Alchemy in the Song and Yuan Periods,” forthcoming in *Modern Chinese Religion*, part 1: *Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan*, ed. John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone (Leiden: Brill). I have provided an outline of the two modes of Neidan self-cultivation more extended than the present one in sec. 3 and 4 of my “Destiny, Vital Force, or Existence? On the Meanings of *Ming* 命 in Daoist Internal Alchemy and its Relation to *Xing* 性 or Human Nature,” forthcoming in *Daoism: Religion, History and Society*. More comprehensive surveys are found in the studies quoted in notes 22 and 24 below.

²⁰ *Chongyang quanzhenji* 重陽全真集 (Complete Reality: A Collection by Wang Chongyang; DZ 1153), 2,7b: *benlai zhenxing huanjindan* 本來真性喚金丹.

the later understanding of superior virtue. Several centuries later, the same view will lead Liu Yiming to say:

Golden Elixir is another name for one's fundamental Nature, inchoate and yet accomplished (*huncheng*). There is no other Golden Elixir outside one's fundamental Nature.²¹

金丹者，混成本性之別名，非本性之外，又有一金丹。

Cultivation of *xing*, in this perspective, comprises cultivation of *ming*, which attains realization through the realization of *xing*. This form of Neidan is associated with the Beizong, or Northern Lineage. In light of the discussion that follows, it is worthy of note that the Beizong is the original core of the Quanzhen 全真 or Complete Reality branch of Daoism, to which the authors discussed in the next two sections of this study claimed affiliation. In addition, one of the early Beizong masters, Qiu Chuji 邱處機 (1148–1227), is traditionally placed at the origins of the Longmen (Dragon Gate) lineage, of one of whose branch lineages Liu Yiming was a representative.²²

The second mode of self-cultivation, instead, initially places emphasis on *ming* (one's embodiment as an individual being, including one's “destiny,” function in existence, and endowment of “vital force”) and focuses on practices that intend to compound the Elixir by purifying the main components of the human being: Essence, Breath, and Spirit (*jing* 精, *qi* 氣, *shen* 神). These practices are typically arranged into three main stages that follow the sequence Essence → Breath → Spirit → Dao. This gradual (*jian* 漸) process focuses first on the cultivation of *ming*, but culminates in the cultivation of *xing*. In his *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Awakening to Reality), Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987?–1082) describes it as beginning with “doing” (*youzuo* 有作, “taking action”) and ending with “non-doing” (*wuwei*):

²¹ *Wuzhen zhizhi* 悟真直指 (Straightforward Directions on the *Wuzhen pian*), commentary to “*Lüshi*” 律詩, poem no. 3. The expression “inchoate and yet accomplished” derives from *Daode jing* 25.

²² The Northern Lineage proper consists of Wang Zhe and his seven disciples, who lived between the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. On this lineage, and on the self-cultivation methods of Quanzhen and Longmen as a whole, see Zhang Guangbao 張廣保, *Jin Yuan Quanzhen dao neidan xinxingxue* 金元全真道內丹心性學 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1995), and the chapter contributed by Chen Bing 陳兵 to *Zhongguo Daojiao shi* 中國道教史, ed. Ren Jiuyu 任繼愈 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1990), 517–45.

It begins with doing, and hardly can one see a thing;
when it comes to non-doing, all begin to understand.

But if you only see non-doing as the essential marvel,
how can you know that doing is the foundation?²³

始于有作人難見，及至無為眾始知，但見無為為要妙，豈知有作是根基。

In this view, therefore, cultivating *ming* is preliminary to cultivating *xing*, and “doing” is preliminary to “non-doing.” This view is consistent with the later understanding of inferior virtue. The self-cultivation mode based on these principles is associated with the Nanzong, or Southern Lineage.²⁴

The association of the two modes of self-cultivation outlined above with superior and inferior virtue, respectively, does not involve a criticism of their distinctive principles per se, but an evaluation of the respective functions within this framework. In particular, in the later discourse on the two types of virtue there is no explicit or implicit criticism of the Neidan practices typified by the Southern Lineage: as Neidan is seen as the way that leads to the precelestial domain and eventually to superior virtue, such criticism would be impossible. In fact, while the doctrinal foundations and the historical circumstances under which the Neidan discourses on *xing* and *ming* were polarized into a “northern” and a “southern” lineage are still open to inquiry, one reason of the emphasis given in the later tradition to the two approaches to self-cultivation appears to be the need of defining them and setting them apart as

²³ *Wuzhen pian*, “Jueju” 絶句, poem no. 42; see Wang Mu 王沐, *Wuzhen pian qianjie* 悟真篇淺解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 99.

²⁴ Nanzong places Zhang Boduan at its origins, followed by a series of four masters, the last of whom is the above-mentioned Bai Yuchan. It is now usually accepted, however, that Nanzong was not a “lineage” in the common sense of the term, and that the sequence of its masters was established at a later time, apparently by Bai Yuchan himself in the early thirteenth century. In addition, it should be mentioned that Bai Yuchan himself occupies a quite distinct place within Nanzong and the Neidan tradition as a whole, and his views often can hardly be associated with those commonly defined “Nanzong.” On this lineage, see Gai Jianmin 蓋健民, *Daojiao jindan pai nanzong kaolun* 道教金丹派南宗考論 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), and Chen Bing’s chapter in the volume cited above (n. 22), 489–516. The three main stages of the Nanzong practice are usually called “refining the Essence to transmute it into Breath” (*lianjing huashi* 煉精化氣), “refining the Breath to transmute it into Spirit” (*lianqi huashen* 煉氣化神), and “refining the Spirit to revert to Emptiness” (*lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛).

neatly as possible with the precise intent of tying them to one another. The Buddhist and the Neo-Confucian views on *xing* and *ming* plainly contributed not only to shape, but also to initiate the Neidan discourses on this subject.²⁵

Seen in this light, the main phenomenon that concerns the two branches of Neidan is the repeated instances of “merging” that occurred from the late thirteenth century onwards. The merging did not only concern the lineages themselves—leading to the creation of multiple non-historical lines of transmission—but especially the respective modes of self-cultivation: since that time, several masters have proposed different models to unify the cultivation of *xing* and *ming*.²⁶ This gave rise to the well-known formulation, *xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修, or “conjoined cultivation of *xing* and *ming*,” a virtually omnipresent subject in Neidan until the present day. “Conjoined cultivation” does not only mean that both *xing* and *ming* should be cultivated; it means, rather, that one should be cultivated first, and the other later, in order to realize both. Which one is the key to cultivate the other is the point of distinction between the approaches typified by the two lineages. With regard to this point, from the Qing period onwards the self-cultivation mode typified by the Northern Lineage has been defined as *xianxing houming* 先性後命 (“first *xing* then *ming*”), while the self-cultivation mode typified by the Southern Lineage has been defined as *xianming houxing* 先命後性 (“first *ming* then *xing*”).²⁷

²⁵⁾ For Buddhism, see Isabelle Robinet, “De quelques effets du bouddhisme sur la problématique taoïste: Aspects de la confrontation du taoïsme au bouddhisme,” in *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong and École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2004), vol. 1, 411–516 (esp. 416–27 on *xing* 性, and 475–90 on Neidan); and Ge Guolong 戈國龍, *Daojiao neidanxue suyuan* 道教內丹學溯源 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2004), 184–237. For Neo-Confucianism, see Paul Crowe, “*Dao* Learning and the Golden Elixir: Shared Paths to Perfection,” *Journal of Daoist Studies* 7 (2014): 89–116. Zhang Guangbao examines the impact of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism on Quanzhen in his work quoted above (note 22), 183–303.

²⁶⁾ On these non-historical lineages see, the article by Yokote quoted in n. 19 above. As remarked by Yokote, while the creators of those lineages often saw themselves as belonging to Quanzhen, they disregarded the patriarchy of northern “institutional” Quanzhen. This suggests that for these masters the term “Quanzhen” does not literally mean affiliation with the monastic order, but in the first place with the self-cultivation methods associated with early Quanzhen, which give priority to cultivating *xing* over cultivating *ming*.

²⁷⁾ On the “conjoined cultivation of *xing* and *ming*” see Ge Guolong, *Daojiao neidanxue tanwei* 道教內丹學探微 (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2012), 83–110. For a sum-

These developments in the Neidan tradition resulted in different readings of the doctrines of the *Daode jing* and the *Cantong qi* on superior and inferior virtue compared to those seen in the earlier *Cantong qi* commentaries. Before examining Liu Yiming's views on this subject, we shall look in some detail at two prior models of integration of the self-cultivation practices outlined above. As we shall see, clear traces of both of them are visible in Liu Yiming's own work.

Li Daochun: The Internal and External Medicines

Li Daochun 李道純, active in present-day Jiangsu at the end of the thirteenth century, is the first author known to have integrated the teachings associated with the Northern and the Southern Lineages with one another.²⁸ In his *Zhonghe ji* 中和集 (The Harmony of the Center: An Anthology), where he qualifies his Neidan as the “Way of Quanzhen” (*quanzhen zhi dao* 全真之道), Li Daochun proposes a first exemplary model for the synthesis of the two modes of cultivation. While he does not use the terms “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue,” his explication of the Internal Medicine (*neiyao* 內藥) and the External Medicine (*waiyao* 外藥) contains the main points made by later Neidan authors who use those terms.²⁹

According to Li Daochun, these two Medicines, or Elixirs, correspond to two different approaches to Neidan that suit an adept's individual qualities. In his view, the Internal Medicine is accessible to those who

mary of the main points, see Guo Jian 郭健, “Xianxing houming yu xianming houxing: Daojiao Nanbeizong neidanxue yanjiu” 先性後命與先命後性 — 道教南北宗內丹學研究, *Zongjiaoxue yanjiu* 2002.2: 95–99.

²⁸ On Li Daochun see, with special regard to the subject of the present section, Sun Gongjin 孫功進, “Li Daochun neidan xingming sixiang tanxi” 李道純內丹性命思想探析, *Jimei daxue xuebao* (Zhixue shehui kexue ban), 12.3 (2009): 5–10; and Wang Wanzen 王婉甄, *Li Daochun daojiao sixiang yanjiu* 李道純道教思想研究 (Hua Mulan wenhua chubanshe; Taipei, 2008), 83–112.

²⁹ Li Daochun's views on Internal Medicine and External Medicine are one example of the wide range of meanings of these and similar terms in Neidan. See Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, “Inner Alchemy: Notes on the Origin and Use of the Term *Neidan*,” *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 5 (1989–90): 163–90, and Isabelle Robinet, “Sur le sens des termes *waidan* et *neidan*,” *Taoist Resources* 3.1 (1991): 3–40, translated as “On the Meaning of the Terms *Waidan* and *Neidan*” in Robinet, *The World Upside Down: Essays on Taoist Internal Alchemy* (Mountain View, Cal.: Golden Elixir Press), 2011, 75–101.

have an innate knowledge of the Dao and—a significant expression with regard to our subject—have already “planted the foundation of virtue” (*zhi deben* 植德本). This Medicine allows one to “transcend the world.” Other practitioners, instead, should begin from the External Medicine, through which they can be free from illness and prolong their life, and then proceed to cultivating the Internal Medicine.

The External Medicine (*waiyao*) allows you to cure illnesses, and to “prolong your life and have lasting presence.”³⁰ The Internal Medicine (*neiyao*) allows you to transcend the world, and to exit from Being and enter Non-Being. In general, those who study the Dao should begin from the External Medicine; then they will know the Internal Medicine by themselves. Superior persons (*gaoshang zhi shi*) have already planted the foundation of virtue, and know it by birth; therefore they do not refine the External Medicine, and directly refine the Internal Medicine.³¹

外藥可以治病，可以長生久視。內藥可以超越，可以出有入無。大凡學道，必先從外藥起，然後自知內藥。高上之士，夙植德本，生而知之，故不鍊外藥，便鍊內藥。

Despite the sharp distinction that he draws between the two Medicines, Li Daochun therefore points out that those who begin by seeking the External Medicine can attain the point in which they “will know the Internal Medicine by themselves” and achieve the same state of realization as those who innately possess it.

Li Daochun then continues by defining the two Medicines in terms of “doing” and “non-doing.” For this purpose, he refers to another passage of the *Daode jing* (sec. 48): “Decrease and then again decrease until there is no doing—there is no doing, yet nothing is not done” (損之又損，以至於無為，無為而無不為). Li Daochun says:

With the Internal Medicine, “there is no doing, yet nothing is not done.” With the External Medicine, “there is doing, and there is something whereby it does.”
內藥「無為無不為」，外藥「有為有以為」。

³⁰) This phrase derives from *Daode jing* 59.

³¹) “Knowing by birth” alludes to a passage of the *Lunyu* 論語; see *Lunyu zhuzi suoyin* 論語逐字索引 (ICS Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series, Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan 1995), 16:9: “Those who know by birth are superior, those who know by study are next.” As we shall see, Liu Yiming also will draw from this passage.

In addition, Li Daochun introduces two other important points, both of which will also be discussed by Liu Yiming. The first point concerns the association between the Internal Medicine and *xing* (Nature), on the one hand, and between the External Medicine and *ming* (Existence), on the other:

The External Medicine brings one's *ming* to fulfillment; the Internal Medicine brings one's *xing* to fulfillment. When the two Medicines are complete, form and Spirit are both wondrous.³²

外藥了命，內藥了性。二藥全形神俱妙。

Li Daochun touches here on the main points in the later discourse on the two ways of realization: whether the starting point is *xing* or *ming*, “non-doing” or “doing,” superior or inferior virtue, both ways should be fulfilled. We shall see Liu Yiming using a similar terminology to distinguish the functions of superior and inferior virtue and to integrate them with one another.

The second point made by Li Daochun concerns the relation between the two Medicines and two types of “body” (*shen* 身). The External Medicine, he writes, is “the superior undertaking of the physical body (*seshen* 色身, *rūpakāya*),” while the Internal Medicine is “the superior undertaking of the dharma-body (*fashen* 法身, *dharmakāya*).” The “physical body” is the raw material of the Neidan practice. Here the adept finds the postcelestial essence, breath, and spirit (*jing*, *qi*, *shen*), which should be refined into the respective precelestial correspondents and gradually re-absorbed into the first principle, the Dao. The dharma-body is—in the Neidan understanding of this term—one's unmanifested “body” of Pure Yang, devoid of birth and death, which is innately realized by some and is attained through the Neidan practice by others. This body is equivalent to the “Yang Spirit” (*yangshen* 陽神), the perfected replica of oneself that is often represented as exiting from the adept's sinciput in the final stage of the alchemical practice. Centuries later, as we shall see, Liu Yiming will make the same distinction, merely

³² The passages discussed above are found in *Zhonghe ji*, 2.4a-b. The last sentence, which is often found in Neidan texts, describes the non-dual state in which form is a receptacle for Spirit, and Spirit manifests itself in form.

replacing the term “physical body” with “illusory body” (*huanshen* 幻身).

Chen Zhixu: Guarding the Essence

Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290–ca. 1368), another major southern master who claims affiliation to Quanzhen, quotes in full—with attribution to its author—Li Daochun’s discourse on the two Medicines in his main work, the *Jindan dayao* 金丹大要 (Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir), and accepts Li Daochun’s views on their relation to *xing* and *ming*.³³ In the same work, he illustrates the qualities of superior and inferior virtue by means of two passages drawn, this time, from the *Zhuangzi*:

The realized men of antiquity slept without dreaming, and their breathing was deep and profound. Since they slept without dreaming, they preserved their Spirit; since their breathing was deep and profound, they breathed through their heels. This is the way of “Superior virtue has no doing—there is nothing whereby it does.”

“Utmost Yin is stern and frigid; Utmost Yang is bright and glittering. The brightness and glitter come forth from the Earth, the sternness and frigidity come forth from Heaven.” This is the way of “Inferior virtue does—there is something whereby it does.”³⁴

古之真人其寢不夢，其息深深。寢不夢則神存，息深深則以踵。此即「上德無為而無以為」之道。「至陰肅肅，至陽赫赫，赫赫發乎地，肅肅出乎天。」此即「下德為之而有以為」之道。

The first paragraph above is in accord with the poem of the *Cantong qi* that describes the spontaneous breathing mode of the person of superior virtue.³⁵ In the second paragraph, the “brightness and glitter com-

³³) *Jindan dayao* (DZ 1067), 5.4b. On Chen Zhixu’s Quanzhen affiliation see 1.1b, as well the two supplements to this work separately published in the Daoist Canon (DZ 1069 and 1070), which contain Chen’s own reconstruction of the Quanzhen lineage. This is one—perhaps the best-known—example of the non-historical lineages mentioned above. On Chen Zhixu, see Zeng Chuanhui, *Yuandai Cantong xue* (above, n. 17), and Zhou Ye 周冶, “*Dao ben yinyang, shunfan nixian: Jiexi Chen Zhixu dandao sixiang de lilun jichu*” 道本陰陽，順凡逆仙—解析陳致虛 丹道思想的理論基礎, *Zongjiaoxue yanjiu* 2003.3: 105–9.

³⁴) *Jindan dayao*, 11.8a-b. The two paragraphs of this passage are based on *Zhuangzi*, 6.228, and quoted from *Zhuangzi*, 21.712, respectively. See translation in Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 77–78 and 225 (slightly modified).

³⁵) *Cantong qi*, sec. 6o: “Cultivate this unceasingly, / and your plentiful breath will course like rain from the clouds / . . . It will stream from the head to the toes; / on reaching the end,

ing forth from the Earth" and the "sternness and frigidity coming forth from Heaven" describe, in the Neidan way of seeing, the True Yang hidden within the Yin and the True Yin hidden within the Yang, and thus represent the alchemical way of inferior virtue.

Elsewhere in the *Jindan dayao*, Chen Zhixu states that superior virtue is concerned with the postcelestial domain (*houtian*) and is represented by the Jade Liquor (*yuye* 玉液), which is the Internal Elixir (*neidan* 內丹); inferior virtue, instead, is concerned with the precelestial domain (*xiantian*) and is represented by the Golden Liquor (*jinye* 金液), which is the External Elixir (*waidan* 外丹). The Internal and the External Elixirs correspond, in Li Daochun's terminology, to the Internal and the External Medicines.³⁶

More importantly, Chen Zhixu is the first known commentator of the *Cantong qi* to explain the poem on superior and inferior virtue (sec. 20, translated above) with regard to the two aspects, or degrees, of Neidan. In his notes on those verses, Chen Zhixu relates superior and inferior virtue to "non-doing" and "doing," respectively, but also introduces a new important element in the discourse on this subject, on which Liu Yiming will comment in strongly negative terms. According to Chen Zhixu, superior virtue is the state in which there is not—or there has not yet been—any loss of essence (*jing*, specifically, the male semen). Vice versa, in his view, inferior virtue is the way that, by means of the Neidan practice, leads to the recovery of that state once the loss of essence has occurred:

Superior virtue refers to one who embodies complete virtue, to the person for whom "nothing is not done." When a male reaches the age of sixteen, his true essence (*zhenjing*, i.e., the essence still in its precelestial state) is complete but is on the point of being dispersed. The person of complete virtue is able to protect it, cherish it, and keep it intact with nothing lacking. Then one meets an enlightened master who transmits the way of cultivation by non-doing, and one's longevity will be unending.

it will rise once again."

³⁶ This passage is found in one of the sections of the *Jindan dayao* omitted in the *Daozang* edition, but included in the *Chongkan Daozang jiyao* edition, 2.31b. In addition to the passages discussed here, Chen Zhixu presents his views on the two types of virtue in his preface to the *Wuzhen pian sanzhu* 悟真篇三注 (Three Commentaries on the *Wuzhen pian*; DZ 142).

This is called being a person for whom “nothing is not done,” one in whom superior virtue is complete. Such is the transformation operated by the saintly man who performs non-doing, such is the efficacy (*gong*) of the great man who achieves non-doing.

上德者，體全德之人也，「無不為」之士也。男子當二八之年，真精全而欲泄。全德之人則能保愛而渾無虧，又遇明師授以無為修攝之道，以永其壽。是謂「無不為」之士，是謂上德之全人也。是即聖人行無為之化，是即大人成無為之功也。

Then Chen Zhixu explains the features of inferior virtue. To do so, he uses two famous phrases—“stealing creation and transformation” (*qie zaohua* 竊造化) and “thieving the ten thousand things” (*dao wanwu* 盜萬物), found in earlier texts that played a major role in Neidan—alluding to those who seek the precelestial hidden within the postcelestial:³⁷

Inferior virtue refers to one who “steals creation and transformation,” to the person who “thieves the ten thousand things.” In everybody, until the age of sixteen, the true essence has not been dispersed; this is called “pure Qian” 乾. As soon as emotions and desires move, the inner line of Qian enters the Palace of Kun 坎. Qian cannot be pure anymore: its center becomes empty and it changes into Li 离. From then onwards, there is dispersion by day and by night. How can one return to the state in which the essence is preserved? The accomplished persons do not wait for the culmination [of that state, followed by its loss]. They practice the way of the Saints for returning to completeness (*shengren fuquan zhi dao*), and by means of it they transform themselves into immortals.

This is called being a person of inferior virtue, one who “steals creation and transformation.” Such is the way performed by the saintly man who “is in accordance with his inner Nature,” such is the efficacy of the man of Spirit who “does.”³⁸

下德者，「竊造化」之人也，「盜萬物」之士也。夫一切人，年甫二八，真精未泄，謂之純乾。逮夫情欲一動，乾之中爻走入坤宮，乾不能純，心虛為離。由是而後，日夜漏泄，存而有者，復幾何哉。惟至人

³⁷⁾ The *Yinfujing* 陰符經 (Scripture of the Hidden Agreement) says: “Heaven and Earth are the thieves of the ten thousand things, the ten thousand things are the thieves of man, and man is the thief of the ten thousand things”; see *Huangdi yinfujing* 黃帝陰符經 (DZ 31), 1b. The *Ruyaojing* 入藥鏡 (Mirror for Compounding the Medicine) says: “Steal Heaven and Earth, seize creation and transformation!”; see *Ruyaojing zhujie* 注解 (Commentary and Explication of the *Ruyaojing*; DZ 135), 6b.

³⁸⁾ The phrase “being in accordance with one’s inner Nature” derives from the opening passages of the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (The Middle Course): “What Heaven has conferred is called inner Nature; being in accordance with inner Nature is called the Way; cultivating the Way is called the teaching.”

者，不待其極，乃行聖人復全之道，以仙其身。是謂下德之士，是「竊造化」之人也。是即聖人率性之道，是即神人有為之功也。

In this passage, Chen Zhixu describes the loss of the “essence” of Qian ☰ and its transfer to Kun ☷: through this process, Qian changes to Li ☷, while its essence is held by Kan ☷. With regard to the human body, this process is equivalent to the shift from the precelestial to the postcelestial: in the postcelestial state, True Yang is hidden within Kan, and its recovery is the purpose of Neidan. In Chen Zhixu's view, the recovery of the True Yang principle requires making one's essence again “complete.”

Chen Zhixu then explains the two other lines in sec. 20 of the *Cantong qi*:

Superior virtue “has no doing, yet nothing is not done”: one obtains the complete body of the Great Ultimate and achieves efficacy in the postcelestial.³⁹ Therefore [the *Cantong qi*] says, “It does not use examining and seeking.”

Inferior virtue “does, and there is something whereby it does”: one seizes the operation (*yong*) of creation and transformation and achieves efficacy in the precelestial. Therefore [the *Cantong qi*] says, “Its operation does not rest.”⁴⁰

上德者，「無為而無不為」也。得太極全體，成後天之功。是曰「不以察求」。下德者，「有為而有以為」也。奪造化之用，成先天之功。是曰「其用不休」。

According to Chen Zhixu, therefore, in superior virtue the state prior to the separation of the One (the Great Ultimate, *taiji* 太極) into the two is spontaneously attained: the postcelestial domain is one with the precelestial domain. Inferior virtue, instead, focuses on seeking; its unceasing search of the True Yang principle needs supports, and the postcelestial domain is used to seek the precelestial state that it hides. This is why Chen Zhixu points out that the “efficacy” of superior and inferior virtue is achieved in the postcelestial and the precelestial domains, respectively: inferior virtue attains realization by ascending to the precelestial, while superior virtue completes the process by returning to the postcelestial.

³⁹ On the “complete body of the Great Ultimate” (*taiji quanti* 太極全體), Chen Zhixu writes in *Jindan dayao*, 5.1b: “Those who practice the great cultivation intend to search for the body of the Great Ultimate before its division, the true instant of the creation of the world.”

⁴⁰ Chen Zhixu's passage discussed above is found in *Zhouyi cantong qi zhujie*, commentary to *zhang* 7.

Liu Yiming will follow several aspects of Chen Zhixu's discourse on superior and inferior virtue, which he certainly knew.⁴¹ As we shall see, however, he emphatically rejects the view that the difference between the two ways depends on the preservation or the loss of the "essence" meant as a material entity.

Liu Yiming's Commentary on *Daode jing* 38

Having traced to some extent the background of the Neidan views on superior and inferior virtue, we shall now look at Liu Yiming's discourse on this subject, beginning from his reading of *Daode jing* 38. Although Liu Yiming's commentary on this passage does not directly concern Neidan, it contains the core of his discourse on the two virtues.⁴²

According to Liu Yiming, while the Dao "is entirely possessed by everyone," there are differences in the ways of cultivation, which suit one's "personality" (or character, temperament, disposition; *qizhi* 氣質). These differences reflect how one knows the Dao—either "by birth" (*shengzhi* 生知) or "by study" (*xuezhi* 學知):⁴³

⁴¹ Liu Yiming's commentary on the *Cantong qi* is based on the so-called "ancient" version (*guwen* 古文), but several details show that he relied for the main text on Chen Zhixu's redaction of the standard version. See Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, vol. 2, 195–97.

⁴² Liu Yiming's little-known *Daode jing* commentary is entitled *Daode jing huiyi* 道德經會義 (The Meaning of the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*). His work actually includes two commentaries, a shorter one entitled *Daode jing yaoyi* 要義 (The Essential Meaning of the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*), followed by the *Daode jing huiyi* proper. I am deeply grateful to Professor Sun Yongle 孫永樂, who in September 2012, during a meeting in Yuzhong 榆中 (Gansu), allowed me to take photographs of his own reproduction of this text and other virtually unknown works by Liu Yiming—including his commentaries to the Buddhist *Xinjing* 心經 (Heart Sutra) and *Jingangjing* 金剛經 (Diamond Sutra). Prof. Sun has edited and published a major collection of rare materials by and about Liu Yiming, entitled *Qiyun biji* 棲雲筆記 (Miscellaneous Notes from Mount Qiyun) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011). The *Daode jing* commentary is not found in Liu Yiming's collected works (the above-mentioned *Daoshu shier zhong*). I am unable to provide precise bibliographic details on the edition that I have seen. As its layout and calligraphic style partly resemble the 1913 edition of the *Daoshu shier zhong*, it may have been published around that time by the Jiangdong shuju 江東書局 in Shanghai. The passages quoted below are found in the *Daode jing huiyi*, 2.31a-b.

⁴³ On knowing "by birth" or "by study," see note 31 above. In Liu Yiming's speech, "study" has no negative connotation and does not imply "theoretical" knowledge: he usually refers to Neidan practitioners as "students" (*xueren* 學人 or *xuezhe* 學者).

... Superior virtue means that one knows it by birth. In those who know it by birth, inner Nature is achieved through their foundation in virtue.⁴⁴ without focusing one's mind (*xin*) on virtue, one spontaneously has virtue. Therefore [the *Daode jing*] says, "superior virtue is not virtuous, thus it has virtue."

Inferior virtue means that one knows it by study. Those who know it by study hold and keep to their virtue: one begins from effort and ends with stability. Since this virtue is lower compared to superior virtue, it cannot be equal to the "superior virtue [that] is not virtuous." Therefore [the *Daode jing*] says, "inferior virtue does not lack virtue, thus it has no virtue."

... 上德者，生而知之者也。生知者，德本性成，無心於德，而自有德，故曰「上德不德，是以有德」。下德者，學而知之者也。學知者，執守其德，由勉抵安，其德稍次於上德，不能如上德不德，故曰「下德不失德，是以無德」。

According to this passage, while the person who innately knows the Dao "spontaneously has virtue" (non-doing), those who acquire knowledge of the Dao through study must begin from "effort" (doing) in order to attain "stability" (non-doing).

Liu Yiming then defines the meaning of "virtue" in this context. In particular, he explains why inferior virtue can elevate itself to the rank of superior virtue: as those who have inferior virtue actually "do not lack virtue," they can perfect their virtue and attain superior virtue.

"Not having virtue" does not mean that one has no virtue at all: rather, one has no spontaneous (*ziran*) virtue, but "does not lack virtue." When one's operation (or: efficacy, *gong*) attains spontaneity, it is a road that leads to the same destination as superior virtue; only, this requires one more level of practice compared to [one who merely] "does not lack virtue."

Indeed, "superior virtue is not virtuous" is when one spontaneously does not do. "Non-doing" means that even if one intends to "do," "there is nothing whereby it does."

"Inferior virtue does not lack virtue" is when one makes an effort in order to do something. "Doing" means that one leaves the false and returns to the true: hence "there is something whereby it does."

無德者，非全無之謂，乃無自然之德，然「不失德」。功至於自然，與上德同歸一途，但多「不失德」一層功夫耳。蓋「上德不德」者，自然無為也，無為者，雖欲為之而「無以為」也。「下德不失德」者，勉強有為也，有為者，去假復真而「有以為也」。

⁴⁴⁾ *Deben* 德本, "foundation in virtue," is the same expression used by Li Daochun when he says that superior persons have "planted the foundation of virtue."

The *Daode jing* commentary quoted above is dated 1801. By that time, Liu Yiming had already presented his discourse on superior and inferior virtue in several works, the most important of which are the *Cantong zhizhi* 參同直指 (Straightforward Pointers on the *Cantong qi*, 1799) and the *Xiuzhen houbian* 修真後辨 (Further Discriminations on the Cultivation of Reality, 1798 or slightly later). The following sections present Liu Yiming's views mainly on the basis of these two works, where we find his most extended discussion of the two degrees of virtue.⁴⁵

Superior Virtue: Preserving Precelestial Unity

In both the *Cantong qi* commentary and the *Xiuzhen houbian*, Liu Yiming's description of superior virtue is more detailed compared to the one found in the *Daode jing* commentary. His notes on sec. 20 of the *Cantong qi* begin with a brief statement on two ways of cultivating the Dao (*xiudao* 修道):

... To cultivate the Dao there are two methods (*fa*): one is the pursuit of keeping one's form (*xing*) intact by means of the Dao, one is the pursuit of extending one's *ming* by means of a technique (*shu*).⁴⁶

... 修道有二法，一以道全形之事，一以術延命之事。

These words are based on the *Huanghefu* 黃鶴賦 (Rhapsody of the Yellow Crane), a poem attributed to Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 that Liu Yiming often quotes in his works. After an introductory stanza, the poem continues with these verses:

⁴⁵ On the *Cantong qi* commentary, which is included in *Daoshu shier zhong*, see n. 41 above. With the *Xiangyan poyi* 象言破疑 (Removing Doubts on Symbolic Language), the *Xiuzhen houbian* is Liu Yiming's main general work on Neidan, containing a summary of his views on this subject arranged into twenty-six sections. Liu Yiming meant this work as a continuation of his *Xiuzhen biannan* 修真辨難 (Making Discriminations in the Cultivation of Reality, 1798), which is framed as an extended series of questions and answers (about 120 altogether) between him and a disciple. Both works are found in the *Daoshu shier zhong*. In addition, the *Houbian* is also included in the *Daozang xubian* 道藏續編 (Sequel to the Daoist Canon) with supplementary annotations by Min Yide 閔一得 (1748–1836), another major Longmen master and a younger contemporary of Liu Yiming. My complete translation of the *Xiuzhen houbian* was recently published as Liu Yiming, *Cultivating the Tao: Taoism and Internal Alchemy* (Mountain View, Cal.: Golden Elixir Press, 2013).

⁴⁶ *Cantong zhizhi*, "Jingwen" 經文, 2.9a.

Superior virtue keeps one's form intact by means of the Dao:
 one's Pure Qian 乾 has not lost its integrity.
 Inferior virtue extends one's *ming* by means of a technique:
 one conjoins Kan 坎 and Li 离 and there is achievement.
 上德以道全其形，是其純乾之未破。下德以術延其命，乃配坎離而方成。

As stated in these verses, superior virtue consists in maintaining the pre-celestial state of Unity (represented by Qian 乾), which is the way of those who spontaneously attain the Dao; inferior virtue consists in conjoining Yin and Yang starting from their postcelestial states (Kan 坎 and Li 离), which is the way of alchemy. In other words, superior virtue is the way of guarding the One before its division into the Two, while inferior virtue is the way of returning from the Two to the One.⁴⁷

In accordance with the *Huanghe fu*, Liu Yiming defines superior virtue as the state in which one guards Unity and “keeps one's form intact by means of the Dao” (*yi dao quan xing* 以道全形):

Superior virtue keeps one's form intact by means of the Dao. One embraces the Origin and guards Unity, and performs the way of non-doing; thus one can fulfill all pursuits (*liaoshi*). Therefore [the *Cantong qi*] says, “Superior virtue has no doing: it does not use examining and seeking.”

上德者，以道全其形，抱元守一，行無為之道，即可了事，故曰「上德無為，不以察求」也。

We shall return below to the important expression, “keeping one's form intact.” In this state, Liu Yiming continues, Celestial Reality (*tianzhen* 天真, the Unity represented by Qian 乾) is undamaged, and therefore one can immediately awaken to one's Nature:

The reason why superior virtue “does not use examining and seeking” is that in the person of superior virtue, Celestial Reality has never been damaged and extraneous breaths (*keqi*) have never entered. As one immediately awakens to one's funda-

⁴⁷⁾ The *Huanghe fu* is also included in the *Daoshu shier zhong* with a brief explanatory note by Liu Yiming. Chen Zhixu's preface to the *Wuzhen pian sanzhu* opens with sentences similar to the first and third lines translated above: “One's form is kept intact by the Dao, one's *ming* is extended by a technique” 形以道全，命以術延. The first sentence, “One's form is kept intact by the Dao,” has an even earlier origin, as it is already found in the Tang-dynasty *Neiguanjing* 內觀經 (Scripture of Inner Contemplation; DZ 641), 5b.

mental Nature (*xing*), there is nothing to cultivate and nothing to verify. One directly goes to the “other shore” (*bìan, nirvāna*), and the function of examining and seeking does not operate.⁴⁸

夫上德之所以「不察求」者，以其上德之人，天真未傷，客氣未入。若頓悟本性，無修無證，直超彼岸，察求之功無所用。

In the *Xiuzhen houbian*, Liu Yiming’s discourse on superior virtue is substantially the same as the one seen above. Here, however, Liu Yiming emphasizes the “wholeness” (or rather, the “intactness,” *quan* 全) of the body of one who preserves superior virtue. With regard to this point, he makes a distinction about the precelestial and postcelestial states that is crucial for his views on the two virtues:

Indeed, in superior virtue one’s body is intact and one’s virtue is full, and the Yang of Qian 乾 has never been damaged. “Never been damaged” means that the precelestial Yang has never been damaged; it does not mean that the postcelestial body has not lost its integrity. When the Yang of Qian is plentiful, with a pure and flawless perfect Essence and an inchoate One Breath (*hunran yiqi*), the five agents gather together and the four images join in harmony. All of the precious things are intact.⁴⁹

蓋上德者，體全德備、乾陽未傷之人。未傷者，是未傷先天之陽，非是未破後天之身。當乾陽具足之時，純粹至精，渾然一氣，五行攢簇，四象和合，寶物佳珍，件件具全。

Before we look at what this distinction involves for Liu Yiming’s definition of superior virtue, it is significant to consider his view on how this state should be preserved: one only needs to “protect it and guard it” (*baoshou* 保守) before it is lost. This requires receiving the instructions of a master, but the “method” (*fa* 法) ultimately is provided by the Dao itself:

Without a method for protecting and guarding this, the Yang necessarily culminates and generates the Yin; wholeness culminates and becomes lacking. Those who know this hasten to seek the oral instructions of an enlightened master. Without waiting for the birth of Yin, they use the method of “keeping one’s form intact by means of the Dao.” They set the natural True Fire (*tianran zhenhuo*) in motion

⁴⁸) *Cantong zhizhi*, “Jingwen,” 2.9a-b.

⁴⁹) The “four images” are the four external agents—Metal, Wood, Water, and Fire—that return to the state of unity.

and refine the Yin Breath of the entire body; they use the Yin instead of being used by the Yin, and achieve efficacy in the postcelestial. When the Yin is exhausted and the Yang is pure, they live a long life free from death.⁵⁰

若無保守之法，則必陽極生陰，圓極即虧。知之者急求明師口訣，不待陰生，即用以道全形之法，運天然真火，煉盡一身陰氣，用六而不為六所用，以成後天之功；陰盡陽純，長生不死矣。

With the discourse translated above, Liu Yiming addresses a major issue within the Neidan tradition. In the state of precelestial Unity, he says, “the Yang of Qian has never been damaged”: Qian 乾 has not yet bestowed its essence to Kun 坎 and is still “intact.” According to Liu Yiming, this concerns the integrity of precelestial Yang; “it does not mean that the postcelestial body has not lost its integrity.” Here Liu Yiming refers to the understanding of the term *poshen* 破身, “losing integrity” or “virginity,” as meaning the first emission of the essence (*jing*, semen) in a male. In this view, which we have seen exemplified by Chen Zhixu, the recovery of the fullness of Qian (Unity) would occur through the recovery of the fullness of one’s essence; but on this basis, “keeping one’s form intact” would refer to the integrity of the postcelestial body.

Liu Yiming dissents from this understanding. In particular, he rejects the view that the state of the postcelestial essence may be the criterion to distinguish superior virtue from inferior virtue: the reason is that the postcelestial essence pertains to the postcelestial body (the “illusory body,” *huanshen*) and not to the precelestial body (the dharma-body, *fashen*). On these grounds, Liu Yiming points out the error that, in his view, is made by those who consider the “intact” body to be the one in which the “essence of the intercourse” (*jiaogan zhi jing* 交感之精, semen) has never been—or is not anymore—given forth:

People in later times have not understood superior virtue and inferior virtue. They merely say that when the essence is given forth, that is inferior virtue, and when it is intact, that is superior virtue. This is a great error! The essence of the intercourse

⁵⁰ The two passages quoted above are found in *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Shangde xiade” 上德下德 (Superior Virtue and Inferior Virtue), 30b–31a. The “natural True Fire” is a Fire that is not intentionally timed according to the system of the “fire phases” (*huohou* 火候), as is usually done in Neidan, but spontaneously circulates within one’s body. The Yin principle in this passage is represented by the number 6: “They use the 6 instead of being used by the 6.”

is something that comes into being after one's birth: it is the impure within the impure. How could one take it as a criterion?⁵¹

後人不知何者為上德，何者為下德，乃直曰，精漏者為下德，精全者為上德。何其謬甚。夫交感之精，係後有之物，濁中之濁，豈可以此為憑證乎。

Liu Yiming gives further explanations on this point in the *Houbian*. The postcelestial breath (the breath of breathing) and the postcelestial spirit (the “cognitive spirit,” *shishen* 識神), he says, are formed at one's birth; for this reason, they cannot serve as the foundation of self-cultivation. This is even more true of the postcelestial essence (semen), which is formed in the male when “the Yang culminates and generates the Yin,” an event that traditionally is said to occur at the age of sixteen. Being something that is not possessed even at birth, the postcelestial essence cannot be used to revert to the precelestial state:

As for the essence of the intercourse, it is, more than anything else, something that comes into being after one's birth. When one is in one's mother's womb, that essence is not there; and it is not there even at birth.... How could something possessed only after birth be used to protect and maintain one's *xing* and one's *ming* intact, to extend the number of one's years and live a long life without aging, and to transcend Yin and Yang? Students should reflect on this over and over again.⁵²
 至於交感之精，尤係後有之物。在母胎時無此精，初生身亦無此精。... 以生身以後之物，而欲保全性命，延年益壽，超出乎陰陽之外，能乎否耶。學者當三思之。

For all the above reasons, Liu Yiming points out that the criterion to distinguish between superior and inferior virtue has nothing to do with the state of the postcelestial essence. The only relevant principle is whether one does or does not possess the precelestial state of Unity:

⁵¹ *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Shangde xiade,” 31a-b. In the passages translated above from his commentary to the *Cantong qi*, Chen Zhixu uses twice the term “true essence” (*zhenjing* 真精) to refer to the material essence (semen) that has not yet emitted. By this term, Chen Zhixu means that this essence is still in its precelestial state. Liu Yiming could not accept this definition. His *Xiuzhen houbian* (“Xiantian jing qi shen” 先天精氣神, 1a) opens with the quotation of a famous poem by Bai Yuchan that refers to the precelestial essence by saying: “This Essence is not the essence of the intercourse: / it is the saliva in the mouth of the Jade Sovereign.”

⁵² *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Houtian jing qi shen” 後天精氣神 (Postcelestial Essence, Breath, and Spirit), 2b-3a, 3b.

From this we know that superior virtue and inferior virtue are not to be considered with regard to the postcelestial, but are to be distinguished with regard to the pre-celestial. When the precelestial is intact, that is superior virtue, and when the pre-celestial is lacking, that is inferior virtue. This is the proper conclusion.⁵³

可知上德下德不在後天上講究，而在先天中分別。先天全則為上德，先天虧則為下德，方是定論。

With regard to the human body, the precelestial state is the dharma-body (*fashen*) and the postcelestial state is the “illusory body” (*huanshen*). In superior virtue, one spontaneously attains the dharma-body, which is “intact” and “undamaged” of its own. After the precelestial state is lost, the Neidan practice allows one to shed the “illusory body” and attain again the dharma-body. This is the function of alchemy, the way of inferior virtue.

Inferior Virtue: Conjoining Yin and Yang

In his *Cantong qi* commentary, Liu Yiming gives this definition of inferior virtue, again partly derived from the passage of the *Huanghe fu* quoted above:

Inferior virtue extends one's *ming* by means of a technique. One begins from effort and ends with stability, and performs the way of doing; then one is able to revert to the Origin. Therefore [the *Cantong qi*] says, “Inferior virtue does: its operation does not rest.”

下德者，以術延其命，由勉抵安，行有為之道，方能還元，故曰「下德為之，其用不休」也。

While the “method” (*fa*) for preserving superior virtue consists in awakening to one's *xing* (Nature) and in maintaining the state of Unity, inferior virtue initially focuses on *ming* (one's individual existence) and requires a “technique” (*shu* 術) in order to return to Unity. None of Liu Yiming's works provides extended details on the practice of Neidan per se, but he often presents his views on its function and its essential features. In the *Cantong qi* commentary, he points out that because of its gradual nature, Neidan can lead from inferior to superior virtue:

⁵³ *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Shangde xiade,” 31b.

The reason why the operation of inferior virtue “does not rest” is that Celestial Reality is lacking and cognition (*zhishi*) has begun. Although one could immediately awaken to one’s fundamental nature (*xing*), one cannot follow it as it is. One must use the way of gradual cultivation and the function of “augmenting and decreasing”: by augmenting and then again augmenting, by decreasing and then again decreasing, one comes to what cannot be augmented or decreased. When righteousness (*yi*) is pure and benevolence (*ren*) is ripe, one reaches the point of cessation. This is why the unceasing operation [of inferior virtue] is valuable.⁵⁴

下德之所以「用不休」者，以其天真已虧，知識已開，雖能頓悟本性，不能斬然馴順，必用漸修之道，增減之功，增而又增，減而又減，直至無可增減，義精仁熟，方到休息之處，此不休之用所由貴也。

In this passage, Liu Yiming refers to righteousness and benevolence, two of the inferior types of virtue mentioned in *Daode jing* 38. “Righteousness is pure and benevolence is ripe” (*yi jing ren shu* 義精仁熟) is a Neo-Confucian expression,⁵⁵ but in his usage, these words describe the state in which inferior virtue returns to its perfect condition: righteousness and benevolence, accordingly, become instances of superior virtue.

In the *Xiuzhen houbian*, Liu Yiming explains in more detail why one is unable to follow the way of superior virtue: since, in the shift from the precelestial to the postcelestial, one loses the “seed” (*zhongzi* 種子) that gives birth to the Elixir, it would be useless to try to apply the way of “non-doing.” One instead should “steal Yin and Yang” and “seize creation and transformation,”⁵⁶ and practice the way of “doing” in order to perform the upward movement that leads from the postcelestial to the precelestial:

As for inferior virtue, after the Yang culminates and the Yin is born, the precelestial is dispersed. The five agents are divided from one another, the four images are not in harmony, and all of the precious things are lost. If one cultivates this by the way of non-doing, it would be as if in the tripod there is no [True] Seed; what is the

⁵⁴) *Cantong zhizhi*, “Jingwen,” 2.9a-b. “Decreasing and then again decreasing” derives from *Daodejing* 48: “Decrease and then again decrease until there is no doing—there is no doing, yet nothing is not done.” In the context of gradual cultivation, “augmenting and decreasing” (*zengjian* 增減) refers to decreasing the Yin and augmenting the Yang in order to restore the state represented by Qian ䷀.

⁵⁵) See, for example, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (*Siku quanshu*), 23.25b.

⁵⁶) “Stealing Yin and Yang” is equivalent to “stealing Heaven and Earth.” See n. 37 above.

purpose of using water and fire to boil an empty pot⁵⁷ One must “steal Yin and Yang,” “seize creation and transformation,” and return from the postcelestial to the precelestial. Only then can that old thing from times past be recovered: it had gone but now it returns, and comes again into one’s full and complete possession.

若夫下德者，自陽極陰生之後，先天已散，五行各分，四象不和，諸般寶物皆失，若以無為之道修之，猶如鼎中無種子，水火煮空鑄，濟的甚事。是必竊陰陽，奪造化，後天中返先天，則當年故物方能無而復有，去而又來，還我一個完完全全家當也。

Recovering the “seed” and making one’s *ming* (Existence) “firm” (*gu* 固) is the first part of the Neidan practice. One then can perform the way of “non-doing,” and attain the dharma-body by nourishing the alchemical Embryo for the symbolic ten months of gestation:

After that original thing is recovered and the foundation of one’s *ming* is firm, one should again set up the furnace and the tripod, and perform the way of non-doing. By “nourishing warmly” (*wenyang*) the Embryo of Sainthood (*shengtai*), in ten months the Breath becomes plentiful, and one delivers the dharma-body. Then this road has led to the same destination as superior virtue.⁵⁸

還其原物，命基已固，別立爐鼎，行無為之道，溫養聖胎，十月氣足，脫出法身，與上德者同歸一途矣。

These words refer to the realization of one’s *xing* (Nature), which pertains to the downward movement from the precelestial to the postcelestial.

The two-part process described above fulfills the function of Neidan. Self-cultivation, according to Liu Yiming, should always involve two stages (*duan* 段), which are performed simultaneously in superior virtue, and in sequence in inferior virtue. In this way, Neidan allows one to attain superior virtue through inferior virtue, and “non-doing” through “doing”:

Xing and *ming* must be cultivated in conjunction (*shuangxiu*), but in the practice there should be two stages (*duan*). In superior virtue, there is no need to cultivate *ming*; one just cultivates *xing*. When *xing* is fulfilled, *ming* is also fulfilled. In infe-

⁵⁷ Liu Yiming alludes to a poem in the *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality): “If in the tripod there is no True Seed (*zhen zhongzi* 真種子), / it is like using water and fire to boil an empty pot.” “Jueju,” poem no. 5; see Wang Mu, *Wuzhen pian qianjie*, 38.

⁵⁸ The two passages quoted above are found in *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Shangde xiade,” 31a.

rior virtue, one must first cultivate *ming* and then cultivate *xing*. After *ming* is fulfilled, one must also fulfill *xing*. Fulfilling *ming* is “doing,” fulfilling *xing* is “non-doing.”⁵⁹

夫性命必須雙修，工夫還要兩段。上德者不待修命而即修性，性了而命亦了。下德者必先修命而後修性，了命又必了性。了命者有為，了性者無為。

When the two ways of realization are accomplished beginning from inferior virtue, the stages mentioned above correspond to two different Elixirs. Like Li Daochun before him, Liu Yiming calls them Internal Medicine (*neiyao*) and External Medicine (*waiyao*).⁶⁰ He relates them to the cultivation of *xing* and *ming*, respectively, and associates them with the two “bodies,” saying: “Without the External Medicine, you cannot shed the illusory body; without the Internal Medicine, you cannot deliver the dharma-body.”⁶¹

Elsewhere in the *Houbian*, the two Elixirs are called Small Reverted Elixir (*xiao huandan* 小還丹) and Great Reverted Elixir (*da huandan* 大還丹). The Small Reverted Elixir “consists in returning from the postcelestial to the precelestial.” This is the movement of “ascent” mentioned in the *Cantong qi*: Liu Yiming describes it by means of familiar alchemical images that represent the conjunction of Yin and Yang, such as Lead and Mercury, or the Lord of Metal (*jingong* 金公) and the Lovely Maid (*chanü* 姥女). Compounding this Elixir is the first stage of Neidan. The practice is completed by compounding the Great Reverted Elixir. In this second stage, one performs the movement of “descent,” returning “from Non-Being to Being, and from the subtle to the manifest”:

At that point, there is an additional higher level of practice. Arrange again the furnace, set up once more the tripod, and warmly nourish the Reverted Elixir in

⁵⁹ *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Shangde xiade,” 31b–32a. On Liu Yiming’s views about *xing* and *ming*, see Liu Ning, *Liu Yiming xiudao sixiang yanjiu*, 42–75, and Liu Zhongyu, *Liu Yiming xue'an*, 65–80. Both authors suggest that Liu Yiming favors cultivating *ming* before *xing*. As the present passage makes clear, this is true only in the perspective of inferior virtue, or Neidan in the strict sense.

⁶⁰ *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Neiwei yaowu” 內外藥物 (The Internal and the External Medicines), 12b–13b.

⁶¹ *Xiuzhen biannan*, 12a. As mentioned above, Liu Yiming’s “illusory body” (*huanshen*) corresponds to Li Daochun’s “physical body” (*seshen*). On the two Elixirs according to Liu Yiming, see Liu Ning, see *Liu Yiming xiudao sixiang yanjiu*, 158–72.

order to “attain the ultimate of Emptiness and the utmost of quiescence.”⁶² Going through repeated cycles, set in motion again the Yin Response (*yinfu*) and the Yang Fire (*yanghuo*); gradually extracting and gradually augmenting, go from Non-Being to Being, and from the subtle to the manifest. “In ten months the embryo is complete”: like a fruit that ripens and falls to the ground, you deliver your dharma-body. This is the Great Elixir.⁶³

於此再加向上工夫，重安爐，復立鼎，將此還丹溫之養之，以至「虛極靜篤」，貞下起元，復運陰符陽火，漸抽漸添，自無而有，自微而著，十月胎全，瓜熟蒂落，脫出法身，是曰大丹。

The final purpose of Neidan is achieved when one compounds both Elixirs:

Those who practice the great cultivation borrow the postcelestial in order to return to the precelestial, and cultivate the precelestial in order to transform the postcelestial. When the precelestial and the postcelestial inchoately become one, when *xing* and *ming* coagulate with one another, this is called “achieving the Elixir.”⁶⁴

大修行人，借後天而返先天，修先天而化後天。先天後天，混而為一，性命凝結，是謂丹成。

Thus Neidan enables one first to ascend to the precelestial, but its practice is concluded when the descent to the postcelestial is also performed. As one operates by transforming (*hua* 化) the postcelestial through the precelestial, these two domains become one.

Conclusion

The distinction between the two degrees of virtue, and therefore between the two aspects of Neidan, is meaningful only in the perspective of the lower degree. As Liu Yiming points out, there is in fact a state even

⁶²) These words derive from *Daode jing* 16, translated earlier in the present study.

⁶³) *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Daxiao huandan” 大小還丹 (Great and Small Reverted Elixir), 14a-b. “Yin Response” and “Yang Fire” are the two main parts of the cycle of the “fire phases” (*huo-hou*). “Extracting and augmenting” (*choutian* 抽添), at this stage of the practice, means augmenting Mercury and decreasing Lead. The sentence “in ten months the embryo is complete” derives from the *Wuzhen pian*, “Lüshi,” poem no. 9; see Wang Mu, *Wuzhen pian qianjie*, 24.

⁶⁴) *Xiuzhen biannan*, 5a.

higher than “non-doing,” and this state is the actual subject of the entire discourse:

The ways of “doing” and “non-doing” are established to provide a starting point to those who possess superior virtue or inferior virtue. When one comes to fully achieving the Great Dao, not only does the operation of “doing” not apply, but also the operation of “non-doing” does not apply.⁶⁵

有為無為之道，為上德下德者下手而設。若到大道完成，不但有為用不著，即無為亦用不著。

Thus even though the primacy of superior virtue—or “non-doing,” the Internal Medicine, the Jade Liquor—is constantly emphasized by Liu Yiming and the other two authors whose views we have surveyed above, there is ultimately no dualism between the two states: there is in fact only one state, which is either innately achieved or gradually attained.

I will return to this point below, after two brief remarks. First, the discourse on superior and inferior virtue is an example of the application of doctrines of the *Daode jing* to Neidan. While the *Daode jing* does not need Neidan, Neidan needs the *Daode jing* to graft its own teachings and practices onto an integral doctrine that, in this particular instance, defines the state of complete realization. If grafting Neidan onto the doctrines of the *Daode jing* was not deemed to be indispensable, neither the *Cantong qi* nor the Neidan masters would use the terms “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue” to define the two forms of self-cultivation that they advocate.

The second remark concerns the two forms of self-cultivation at the basis of superior and inferior virtue. As mentioned above, the Neidan tradition has associated these modes of doctrine and practice, focused on cultivating *xing* and cultivating *ming*, with the Northern and the Southern lineages, respectively. The extent to which this association reflects actual distinctions between the two lineages, or is the result of a later construction (two assumptions that are not mutually exclusive), is

⁶⁵) *Xiuzhen houbian*, “Shangde xiade,” 32a. Elsewhere in the same work (“Youwei wuwei” 有為無為, 2.33b), Liu Yiming writes: “When students meet an enlightened master, at first they seek the Way of doing, and then they seek the Way of non-doing. Finally, when they seek the Way in which neither doing nor non-doing are established, the undertaking of the cultivation of Reality can take them to the Great Awakening.”

one of many subjects that await further inquiry in the study of Neidan. Yet, the subject surveyed in this article demonstrates that, independently from any issue of “lineages,” the two forms of self-cultivation play fundamental roles in Neidan. Neglecting these roles would not only make the discourse on superior and inferior virtue hardly comprehensible, but also the whole subject of the “conjoined cultivation of *xing* and *ming*” virtually meaningless. This is also true of the influence played on Neidan by Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, which revolves exactly around the functions of *xing* and *ming*.

The existence of two stages, or degrees, of realization is therefore implicit in Neidan, or at least in a certain view of Neidan. According to this view, the Northern and the Southern lineages have provided the emblematic modes of self-cultivation for realizing the two states; the doctrine of the two states was enunciated in the main text of Neidan, the *Cantong qi*, which calls them “superior virtue” and “inferior virtue”; and the canonical description of the two states in the *Cantong qi* shows that the prime source of that doctrine is the teachings on “doing” and “non-doing” in the *Daodejing*.

One question inevitably emerges with regard to this subject: as those who possess superior virtue are endowed with the immediate realization of the Dao and do not need a technique of self-cultivation, is superior virtue part of the domain of Neidan? Liu Yiming’s passage quoted above answers this question. In the perspective of superior virtue, superior and inferior virtue do not even exist: there is no need of practicing the way of inferior virtue, and therefore there is no need of Neidan. In the perspective of inferior virtue, instead, Neidan does include superior virtue: attaining superior virtue is the very purpose of Neidan. The function of Neidan lies here, but it ends as soon as it is fulfilled. Neidan is the way of inferior virtue, but inferior virtue has only one purpose: leading to superior virtue.