

Women in Daoism

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Three Pines Press

Three Pines Press
303 Cambridge Street, #71
Cambridge, MA 02141
www.threepinespress.com

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition, 2003

Printed in the United States of America

⊗ This edition is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard Institute Z39.48 Standard.

Distributed in the United States by Three Pines Press.

Cover art: *The Queen Mother of the West and Her Court*. Qing dynasty, 17th century, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk. From *Daojiao shenxian huaji* (1995).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Despeux, Catherine.

Women in daoism / Catherine Despeux, Livia Kohn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-931483-01-9

1. Taoism--History. 2. Taoist women--History. I. Kohn, Livia, 1956-
II. Title.

BL1923 .D47 2003

299'.514'082--dc21

2003013339

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	Western Zhou	1122-770
	Eastern Zhou	770-221
	Qin	221-206
	Former Han	206-6
C.E	Later Han	23-220
	Three Kingdoms	220-265
	Western Jin	265-317
	Eastern Jin	317-420
	Six Dynasties	420-589
	Sui	589-618
	Tang	618-907
	Five Dynasties	907-960
	Northern Song	960-1126
	Southern Song	1126-1260
	Mongol-Yuan	1260-1368
	Ming	1368-1644
	Manchu-Qing	1644-1911
	Republic (Taiwan)	1911-
	People's Republic	1949-

Acknowledgments

This book grew over the last several years, in close cooperation of the two authors. The idea for the project arose when students and colleagues alike continued to mention the need for a survey volume on the roles and practices of women in the Daoist religion. Since both authors had done previous work on the subject, it was agreed to start with existing writings as a basis and develop the book from there. As a result, much in the present volume reflects prior work undertaken by the two authors, notably Catherine Despeux's *Les immortelles de la Chine ancienne* (1990), and Livia Kohn's "The Mother of the Tao" (1990) and "Doumu: The Mother of the Dipper" (2001). From the root of these works, the book has grown, developing as scholarship expanded and as we became more conscious of issues and historical details.

In the course of writing and editing, the book saw various drafts and underwent many revisions. These were greatly aided by the active comments and suggestions of many friends and colleagues. Stephan Peter Bumbacher read the manuscript with great meticulousness, gave bibliographical additions, added greatly to its overall correctness, and sharpened our vision of various interrelated concepts and issues. Suzanne Cahill carefully went over the entire book in its final version, suggesting improvements and changes to various chapters and paying special attention to the presentation on Xiwang mu. Patricia Ebrey worked through an early draft with great care and had many good ideas for the formulation and problematization of gender issues, especially in the introduction. Beata Grant provided much needed information on successful Buddhist women of the late imperial period and helped with finetuning the introduction. Russell Kirkland made thoughtful comments and gave numerous helpful suggestions to various sections of the book, and in particular the introduction. Liu Xun contributed significantly to our understanding of inner alchemical practices in the Ming dynasty; he helped out with identification of authors and texts, information on twentieth-century masters, and numerous bibliographic resources. James Miller

gave insightful comments on terminology and conceptualization, also aiding with questions of editing and translation. Jordan Paper provided various suggestions on the work and added to our understanding of contemporary feminist theology and related issues. Lisa Raphals was supportive of the project. Thomas E. Smith provided translations of passages from the *Liexian zhuan* and also made numerous helpful suggestions on the role of women in this ancient text. Last, but not least, Janet Theiss provided information on the life and fate of a Qing-dynasty Daoist nun, based on official and court notices.

They all took a kind and detailed interest in the project, providing numerous notes and corrections, and helped with formulating problems as much as solutions. Still, they are not responsible for the views or facts described in this book, and all errors and oddities are owned solely by the authors.

Introduction

Daoism is the indigenous higher religion of traditional China. Growing from a philosophical root and developing through practices of longevity and immortality, it has found expression in communal organizations, ritual structures, and age-old lineages. A multifaceted tradition, Daoism in the 2,500 years of its history has related to women in a number of different ways matching the complexity of other religions, where the relationship to the female is often ambiguous and ambivalent. They commonly see motherhood, sexuality, fertility, esoteric knowledge, and secret powers as closely linked with the feminine and evaluate these aspects positively. But many religions also relegate women to inferior status, considering them of a lower nature, impure and irresponsible, and often suppressing them with greater or lesser severity.¹

The complexity of women's positions is particularly poignant in the Daoist case, since the religion is caught between its ideal cosmological premise of the power of yin and the realities of a strongly patriarchal society following the Confucian model. That is to say, cosmologically Daoism sees women as expressions of the pure cosmic force of yin, necessary for the working of the universe, equal and for some schools even superior to yang. Daoism also links the Dao itself, the force of creation at the foundation of the cosmos, to the female and describes it as the mother of all beings. Within the religion there is a widespread attitude of veneration and respect for the feminine, honoring the cosmic connection as well as the productive and nurturing nature of women.

However, Daoism throughout its history has lived and breathed the social vision of mainstream Confucian society, which was patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal, and saw women as inferior to men. Tradi-

¹ On women in various religions, see Plaskow and Romero 1974; Carmody 1979; Falk and Gross 1980; Sharma 1987; 1994; 2000; King 1997; Young 1999.

tional Chinese culture relegated women to the inner quarters of the house and prevented them from participating in decision-making and larger social issues (Ebrey 1993, 7-8). In Confucian thinking only sons were valued, since they alone could continue the family line and fulfill the ancestral obligations. Girls, often not even counted among a man's children, were commonly treated with disregard and contempt, considered a burden since they would eventually marry out and continue someone else's bloodline. They were not seen worthy of education, except in household skills, and their natural cycles rendered them impure and unsuitable for major responsibilities.

Women in Confucian China were defined largely through their relationships with men—being either daughters, wives, mothers, or widows. Already the *Liji* (Book of Rites) notes that they had the duty of “threefold obedience.” And the classic on Confucian women, the *Lienü zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Women), ascribed to Liu Xiang (77-6 B.C.E.), says: “A woman needs someone to depend on. While her father is alive, she is dependent on him. While her husband is alive, she is dependent on him. And while her son is alive, she is dependent on him” (3.5a; Bumbacher 1998, 674; O'Hara 1980; Sung 1981; Raphals 1998). According to this model, men had full control over the lives and activities of their womenfolk, determining the training and treatment of their daughters, able to mistreat and divorce their wives at will, and shunning widows as outcasts and socially useless.² Wives in particular were easily rejected and divorced, for reasons including sterility, lewdness, disobedience to the parents-in-law, loquacity, stealing, jealousy, and having a repulsive disease (*Lienü zhuan* 2.5a; Gulik 1961, 266; Bumbacher 1998, 678). But many never even made it to the status of wife, reserved for the senior and legally married bride. Others were concubines or “little maids,” menial

² Footbinding was one way in which women were controlled in traditional China. It made them into status symbols and expressions of conspicuous consumption (Ko 2001, 151; see also Levy 1966; Paper 1997, 91-92; Ko 2002, 158; Ebrey 1993, 266). Female infanticide has been common (Gulik 1961, 111; Carmody 1979, 68). Widows were shunned and had low social standing (Waltner 1981, 131). See also Guisso 1981; Holmgren 1995; Watson and Ebrey 1991; Ebrey 1993.

women who had no property rights or status claims (Watson 1991, 233-34).

A moving document of their plight is the poem by the scholar-official Fu Xuan (217-278 C.E.), contained in the *Yutai xinyong* (New Songs for a Jade Terrace), a sixth-century poetry collection:

Bitter indeed it is to be born a woman,
 It is difficult to imagine anything so low! . . .
 A girl is raised without joy or love,
 No one in her family really cares for her.
 Grown up, she has to hide in the inner rooms,
 Cover her head, be afraid to look others in the face.
 And no one sheds a tear when she is married off,
 All ties with her own kin are abruptly severed. . . .
 Her husband's love is as aloof as the Milky Way,
 Yet she must follow him like a sunflower the sun.
 Their hearts are soon as far apart as fire and water,
 She is blamed for all and everything that goes wrong.
 (Gulik 1961, 111-12)

This rather dismal picture of women's lives reflects the Confucian ideal, held up as a model to strive for but only partially realized in history. In actual fact, women in Chinese society had a great deal of freedom and responsibility. For example, women of the lower classes had to work hard outside the home, not only running households but also working in agriculture and business (Ko 1994). They interacted freely with men and were not restricted to their own homes (Bray 1997). If they ended up in the entertainment world, they were not inevitably chattels of cruel madams, but in some cases found "opportunities to develop their literary, musical, and artistic talents" in this milieu (Ebrey 1993, 5). Women of the upper classes similarly functioned as political and intellectual agents, not only educating their sons but also giving advice to their husbands and thus influencing policy making and social realities (Raphals 1998, 4, 259). These women, moreover, carried responsibility not only for their husband's clan but also maintained close relations to their native family, cementing social alliances and forging political bonds (Thatcher 1991, 45). They may not have mixed freely with males beyond their immediate household, but they created women's networks that carried considerable weight in the community (Bray 1997).

Mothers, moreover, were the object of the Confucian virtue of filial piety, which demanded respect for the mother and obedience to her wishes. Not entirely misogynous, Confucians acknowledged the importance of yin, paid veneration to the sacrality of the Earth, and honored their mothers—often matriarchs who ruled the household and educators who shaped the worldview of sons (Bumbacher 1998, 681; Paper 1997, 48).³ Still, women in traditional Chinese society were usually prevented from reaching more than a limited level of influence.

Also, social rules changed over time, so that, for example, divorce by mutual consent became legal in the Tang dynasty. Women from the Song onward maintained ownership of their dowry and could accumulate wealth in their own right (Ebrey 1991; 1993, 6). In the Ming and Qing women's overall literacy grew to the point that we know of over three thousand anthologies of women's poems from late imperial China (Grant 1996, 53; Chang and Saussey 1999). Widows, far from being only victims and outcasts, were often strong agents who made independent decisions, lauded highly if they remained true to their husband's clan (Ebrey 1993, 5, 204; Holmgren 1981; Mann 1987).

The overwhelming majority of women in traditional China married and did not pursue an independent career (Ebrey 1993, 7). Still, even if a woman remained largely in the inner quarters, this was not necessarily conceived as a limitation and restriction. There was also a dimension of the "marital relationship that emphasizes affection, partnership, and shared responsibility" (Mann 1991, 208; Overmyer 1981, 93), so that being in the house represented a position of safety and refuge. Women forced out of their seclusion due to political upheaval or economic hardship tended to express their yearning for the peace, tranquility, and security of the inner court (see Ko 2001). Staying at home, surrounded by familiar figures and things, performing tasks well under their control served as much to reassure the women's identity and self-worth as it helped to maintain the proper social order. Being a woman in Confucian

³ The importance of women in the education of boys also appears in contemporary Japan, where the trait of *amae* or "loving sweetness" is a key characteristic. See Doi 1973.

China, therefore, although at first glance a lowly and dependent situation, was not without benefits or flexibility.⁴

The roles of Daoist women in this context are complex. Normatively, Daoism reflects the mainstream vision of women, and female lay followers were usually married, subscribed to the program set out by society, and remained subject to Confucian restrictions. In other reflections of the mainstream ideal, there are also some Daoist practices that involve the exploitation of women, either sexually or socially. However, Daoism goes beyond mainstream Chinese values in that many of its strands propose a feminine ideal as cosmic yin and venerate important goddesses and immortals. These serve as models to living women. Daoism, moreover, offers a social alternative for women in that it opens paths to pursue their own goals as independent agents, be it the practice of self-cultivation, service as mediums, nuns, or priests, or attainment of immortality.

The following chapters survey and arrange examples culled from the historical record to illustrate changes in the Daoist perception and social situation of women. The historic record is used in a way similar to how a geologist uses the geological record: by noting changes in morphological structures we can become aware of the “surface conditions” found in different time periods. A recurrent theme that arises throughout is the control over the feminine body. As the definitions and means of control change, so do the roles and opportunities available for women in Daoist culture. Some of the issues raised accordingly include control over sexual bodies, the body of scripture, bodily nourishment, ritual garb, and the body as a gateway between society and transcendence, between microcosm and macrocosm. The volume will show how women in Daoism have appeared in various ideal forms and historical personages, reflecting both general cultural Chinese attitudes and the different organizational constellations within the religion. Without oversimplifying the

⁴ For more on women in Confucian society, see Gulik 1961; Wolf 1972; Wolf and Witke 1975; Guisso and Johannesen 1981; Overmyer 1981; Kristeva 1986; Chow 1991; Watson and Ebrey 1991; Ko 1994; Bray 1997; Mann 1997; Paper 1997; Raphals 1998; Zurndorfer 1999; Mann and Cheng 2001; Wang 2003. Women who rejected the stereotype tended to get a bad reputation. For example, Empress Wu (Fitzgerald 1955), Zixi (Bland 1910), and Jiang Qing (Witke 1977).

matter, one can distinguish five major visions and roles of women in Daoism, each dominant in a certain period of the religion's history. They are described in chronological order and begin with the vision of motherhood and the goddess, since the earliest extant sources deal with these issues. Women's body cultivation comes last because texts on the subject only appear in the late imperial period. The five roles and images are:

- (1) the female as mother, the life-giver and nurturing power of the universe—in ancient Daoism expressed in the philosophy of the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue, ca. 350 B.C.E.) as well as in Daoist mother goddesses
- (2) women as representatives of the cosmic force of yin, complementary to the male or yang, reflecting both the universal presence of yin and its expression in sexuality and fertility—in Han-dynasty longevity practices and among early Daoist communities of the second century C.E.
- (3) women as divine teachers and bestowers of esoteric revelations, empowering adepts through instruction and direct interaction—in the Highest Clarity or Purity (Shangqing) movement of the fourth century
- (4) women as possessors of supernatural connections, healing powers, and shamanic techniques, leading to the emergence of powerful priests, founders, and matriarchs—in the high middle ages and well into the late imperial period (Tang through Ming)
- (5) the female body as the seat of essential ingredients and processes of spiritual transformation, understood in the terms of inner alchemy—in the late imperial and modern periods

The Dao as Mother

The veneration of motherhood in Chinese culture is strongly expressed in the ancient *Daode jing*, a collection of aphorisms associated with the

legendary sage Laozi, the Old Master (see Henricks 2000; LaFargue 1992). The text represents the Dao as the great mother, the essential element of water that nurtures all, and possessed of feminine qualities of softness and weakness (Overmyer 1981, 92).

The Dao as mother is where all beings come from and to which they all return, the source and essence of the universe, the all-embracing and nurturing power at the root of all (Reed 1987, 162). Described variously (chs. 1, 20, 25, 32, 34), the Dao is called the womb of the universe that brings forth all and nurtures all; every being is part of a single, integrated organism that ultimately goes back to and is embraced by the Dao (Chen 1974, 57; 1969). People who attain the Dao consequently have total trust in it as their universal mother. They allow all changes and transformations—even death—to happen naturally and place themselves in the mother's position at the mysterious center of the cosmos, where, as Ellen Marie Chen points out, "things at the same time emerge into the activities of life and return to the quietude of death" (1973, 235).

Other scholars also affirm the predominance of motherhood in the *Daode jing*, and some even explicitly associate the Dao with the great mother of mythology.⁵ Yet others see the feminine in the *Daode jing* as the true complement of the masculine and find that the realization of the sage in the world, rather than being a reduction to feminine values, lies in the reconciliation of opposites manifest in the embodiment of the Dao and the attainment of life as a consummate person who is neither feminine nor masculine (Ames 1981, 43). This androgynous ideal found in visions of the Dao, moreover, continues in the later tradition, where it appears in the form of various mother goddesses presented below.

Besides the strong emphasis on motherhood, the *Daode jing* also links the Dao with female animals (chs. 6, 10, 28, 61) and uses various symbols that indicate containing and latency—such as the empty vessel (ch. 4), the bellows (ch. 5), the dark unborn (ch. 1), water (chs. 6, 78), and the valley (chs. 6, 28, 32) (Chen 1974, 53). It also emphasizes that the Dao embraces all (chs. 27, 32), evenly spreads its goodness (ch. 32), and cher-

⁵ See Needham 1956; Erkes in Duyvendak 1954, 56. On the great mother in mythology, see Neumann; 1963; Preston 1982.

ishes all beings with motherly love (ch. 67). It notes that the female overcomes the male by its quality of stillness (ch. 61) and that in order to attain union with the Dao one should abide by the female (ch. 28), cultivating the qualities of weakness and softness (Chen 1974, 51).

Here the image of the feminine is not entirely one of giving and nurturing, but contains elements associated with the darker side of yin, things like weakness, stillness, passivity, darkness, emptiness, and withdrawal. It reveals a more shadowy, mysterious, even uncanny side of the female—exalted in the *Daode jing* as the way to overcome and balance the dominant mode of the world, yet also linking women with rather somber and unassuming values. This reflects the mainstream ideal of Chinese culture, where women in general were sequestered in the inner chambers and encouraged to develop virtues that made them easy to control, such as chastity, modesty, meekness, and obedience. The *Daode jing*, therefore, in both its strong emphasis on motherhood and its characterization of the female as dark, weak, and withdrawing reflects standard Chinese attitudes toward women. But it also modifies these attitudes by placing a positive value on the female and contrasting it with the male, ruthless and scheming, ways of the world.

Women and Cosmic Yin

Another major vision of the female in Daoism emerges under the influence of yin-yang cosmology in the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.). Here women are seen as representatives of yin and complementary to yang, one half of the two forces that govern all life. In some instances yin is even valued more highly—as for example in the system of Chinese medicine where the five organs (liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys) that store and nurture the vital energy of *qi*, thereby essentially determining people's health and life expectancy, are classified as yin. They are matched by the six yang organs (stomach, bladder, gall bladder, small and large intestine, triple heater), which are active in nature and more involved in digestion and elimination, and classified as secondary in importance (see Porkert 1974; Kaptchuk 1983; Liu 1988).

Before the establishment of Daoist community organizations in the second century C.E., yin-yang cosmology was applied on a practical level in the cultivation of *qi* for the attainment of long life and immortality. Practitioners, who did not think of themselves as “Daoists” but some of whom were later canonized by the tradition, used the yin-yang system to modify their diets, breathing, and movements, with the goal of purifying the *qi* within and maximizing its potential, thus reaching the greatest possible vitality. Both men and women participated in these practices, however, men took particular advantage of women in sexual practices, known as “bedchamber arts” (*fangzhong shu*) and first documented in the manuscripts found at Mawangdui and dated to 168 B.C.E. (Harper 1987; 1999).

Geared to enhance men’s *qi* by absorbing that of their female partners, these techniques taught men to have intercourse with as many women as possible, preferably young and healthy ones, bring them to orgasm so they would emit their sexual essence—*jing*, a manifest form of *qi*—but never have an ejaculation themselves. Instead, men were to experience arousal and, by applying meditative concentration and physical pressure to the perineum, prevent their sexual essence from flowing out and visualize it rising up along the spine towards the head. Known as “reverting the sexual essence to nourish the brain” (*huanjing bunao*), this method is commonly seen today as a form of sexual vampirism that encourages men to value women only for their *qi* and discard them after use.⁶

The doctrine behind these techniques assumes that women possess an inexhaustible supply of yin and will not suffer from the practice. Not only that, they experience marvelous climaxes through the skilled techniques employed by the men. On the other hand, it is also assumed that women will not voluntarily agree to be thus used, and the literature describes the practices as a form of war which could best be won if the opponent remained ignorant of the game. Thus the *Yufang bijue* (Secret Formula of the Jade Chamber), a medieval text on nourishing life, quotes the Master of Central Harmony (Zhonghezi) as saying:

⁶ For studies of these sexual practices, which also formed part of Daoism, see Needham 1956; Gulik 1961; Ishihara and Levy 1970; Chang 1977; Chia and Winn 1984; Robinet 1988; Reid 1989; Wile 1992; Chu 1994.

A man who intends to nourish his yang essence must not permit women to learn this art. Her knowledge of it will do him no good, and can even make him ill. This is the meaning of the proverb: "Do not lend another a dangerous weapon."

In fact, if you encounter a knowledgeable woman, it is best to gather up your weapons, because you will not win. Similarly the longlived Pengzu affirms that if a man wants to reap great profits from the sexual act, he must preferably do so with a woman who is ignorant of this art. (In *Ishimpō* 28.5b-6a; see Wile 1992; Ishihara and Levy 1970)⁷

With the exception of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwang mu) and some enterprising early immortals who used similar methods on men, women tend to be victims in this kind of practice, which was known also outside of Daoist circles. If women ever do engage in aggressive sexual behavior or promiscuity, society tends to label them as demonic "fox fairies." Such fairies were believed to be supernatural beings, developed over centuries from foxes or other animals that had accumulated magical powers and learned the art of appearing in human form. To enhance their powers even more and attain full immortality, they had to obtain yang *qi*, ideally from virile young men. Preying on lonely, young scholars, they engaged in a sexual relationship with them and eventually brought about their death from exhaustion and *qi*-depletion.⁸

The sexual partner practices of ancient China have long been associated with Daoism in the Western mind. In fact, they evolved as part of longevity practices long before the beginning of Daoism as a religion and were undertaken by all different members of Chinese society. Daoist schools integrated their principles, but had a mixed relationship to them over the millennia—both rejecting and embracing them in different contexts.

⁷ The text survives in a Japanese edition of medical and longevity materials, dated to 984. It was not codified in the Daoist canon due to editorial restrictions in later dynasties

⁸ On fox fairies and their activities, see Watters 1874; Giles 1916; Krappe 1944; Johnson 1974; Huntington 1993.

For example, among the earliest organized groups of the second century C.E., the Way of Great Peace (Taiping dao) and the Celestial Masters (Tianshi), sexual practices were sublimated in ritual intercourse. Characterized by their strong millenarian belief systems, ritually based hierarchies, moral life-style, and intense community cohesion, these groups formed the backbone of organized Daoist religion as it came to grow over the millennia (see Hendrischke 2000). As in the *Daode jing* and in mainstream culture, mothers and matrons were highly honored and played leading roles as wives of leaders and as senior priests or libationers (*jijiu*) in their own right. Beyond that, younger women were key participants in initiatory rites.

Early Daoists understood sexuality as the most direct way of harmonizing yin and yang, continuing a belief in ancient China that sexual exchange was necessary not only for the individual's wellbeing but also for the proper functioning of the universe. The emperor as intermediary between heaven and earth had a regulated sex life in harmony with the evolution of yin and yang *qi*. "Ladies of the court called *nüshi* were experts in the regulation and supervision of the sexual relationship of the king and his wives. They made sure that the king received them on the good days in the calendar according to the cycle established by the *Book of Rites* for each rank" (Gulik 1961, 42-43). In the countryside, villagers similarly celebrated the renewal of spring with festivals during which sacred unions were commonly practiced (see Granet 1932).

Early Daoists similarly saw the interaction of yin and yang as leading to a state of unitary *qi* and to harmony with the Dao; it could occur as bodily, spiritual, or intellectual intercourse (Reed 1987, 165-66). In either case, each partner had his or her role: the yang creating and engendering, the yin transforming and transmuting. In the sexual act as conceived by Daoists, adepts learned to detach themselves from desire and to dissociate orgasm from pleasure. The act itself was less important than its effect of setting the *qi* in harmonious motion along the inner bodily circuits of the participants, where it provided sustenance and nourishment instead of being wasted either by physically flowing out of the body or through passionate outbursts of emotion. In the sexual act Daoists prioritized the internal over the external, the invisible over the visible, in order to allow full empowerment of the harmony of the two forces, thereby

benefiting themselves, their community, and the cosmos at large (Despeux 1990, 36).

Both the Way of Great Peace and the Celestial Masters practiced sexual rites as part of an initiatory rite known as “the harmonization of *qi*” (*heqi*). As far as we can tell from brief notes in later sources, it consisted of a complex ceremony during which male sexual energy (yellow *qi*) and female sexual energy (red *qi*) joined together in accord with cosmic forces (Schipper 1984, 203). The rite was in the quiet chamber (*jingshi*), in the presence of a master and an instructor. Adepts began with slow, formal movements accompanied by meditations to create a sacred space, then established the harmony between their *qi* and the cosmic *qi* through visualizations. For example:

May each person visualize the *qi* of his cinnabar field [below the navel] as large as a six-inch mirror, leaving the body through open space. Its light progressively increases to illuminate the head and bathe the entire body in radiance, so that the adept can clearly discern the five organs, the six viscera, the nine palaces, the twelve lodgings, the four limbs, as well as all the joints, vessels, pores, and defensive and nutritive *qi* within the body and without. (*Shangqing huangshu guodu yi*, DZ 1294, 2a; Despeux 1990, 29-30)⁹

Next, adepts informed their master and various divinities that they were going to undertake the harmonization of *qi*. This involved ritualistic movements in precise directions and according to astronomically defined positions, as well as the concentration and firm maintenance of bodily essence and vital spirits through the retention of sexual fluids. Reverted away from orgasmic expulsion, these fluids were moved up along the spinal column and into the head, where they supposedly nourished the brain and enhanced the individual’s health and the community’s harmony. The risen *qi* would also communicate with the gods of the heavens who in turn erased the names of all participating members

⁹ This text is a fourth-century Highest Clarity document that contains remnants of earlier practices, which date from the second or third centuries (Schipper 1994, 252). Titles in the Daoist canon are abbreviated DZ and numbered according to Schipper 1975; Komjathy 2002.

from the registers of death and instead inscribed them in the ledgers of long life and immortality (see Stein 1963; Yan 2001).

In this practice women functioned as equal partners. They were valued as important members of the community and carried their fair share of responsibility and benefits. Going beyond the ancient evaluation of yin as dark, weak, and withdrawing, the Celestial Masters established a new level of respect and honor for women among their followers. However, neither the Great Peace movement nor the Celestial Masters were able to practice their harmonization of *qi* for long. The Great Peace movement, believing their leader to be the next rightful emperor of China, in 184 rose in rebellion against the Han and was eliminated in a series of military campaigns. The Celestial Masters were caught up in political power struggles and surrendered their domain to the warlord Cao Cao in 215 (see Levy 1956; Kobayashi 1992). Following this, they were forced to migrate to different parts of north China and began to form small enclaves among the larger populace, who tended to view their sexual and energetic practices with suspicion and disdain. In due course several sets of new revelations grew from the mixture of Celestial Masters practices and local beliefs, transforming sexual initiations and shifting the vision of women to another dimension.

Divine Teachers

Both in the “New Code,” a set of precepts to reform the Celestial Masters which was revealed to the visionary Kou Qianzhi (365-448) in north China in 415 and 423, and in the Highest Clarity revelations of Yang Xi (330-386) in south China in 364-370,¹⁰ women appear less as equal sexual partners than as teachers and masters of techniques, providers of instruction and secrets for personal and communal cultivation.

For example, a key revelatory deity of the Highest Clarity texts was Wei Huacun (252-334), originally the daughter of a high official and an adept of the Celestial Masters (Reed 1987, 167). Married to a leading religious

¹⁰ On Kou’s new Daoism, see Mather 1979; Kohn 2000. On Yang Xi and the Highest Clarity revelations, see Robinet 1984; Strickmann 1978c; 1981.

officer and the mother of two sons, she retired to a separate part of the family compound and devoted herself to self-cultivation. In 299, she had visions of several perfected beings who presented her with sacred scriptures and oral instruction and became a libationer with ritual powers and administrative duties. During the war that led to the rise of the Eastern Jin in 317, her family fled to Jiankang (modern Nanjing), after which she spent much of her life in seclusion, receiving further visits from celestial perfected of high rank (Despeux 2000a, 388). Eventually she attained the Dao on the holy mountain of the south (Mount Heng) in Hunan, which at the time was an active center of both Buddhist and Daoist practices (see Faure 1987; Robson 1995). She was accordingly called Nanyue furen (Lady of the Southern Peak) and, after her ascension to heaven, appeared to Yang Xi and revealed numerous texts and instructions (Bumbacher 1998, 690-91; 2000a, 520).¹¹

Other important female revealers in the Highest Clarity tradition include the Queen Mother of the West, the Lady of Purple Tenuity (Ziwei furen), and the Lady of Highest Prime (Shangyuan furen). In their role as teachers they continue an ancient tradition first found among texts on longevity practices, and especially on sexual arts, of women appearing as masters and instructors: the Simple Woman (Sunü), the Colorful Woman (Cainü), and the Mysterious Woman (Xuannü), each instructing the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) and leaving a text on sexual fulfillment behind (Gulik 1961, 121-25).

In Highest Clarity, such learned ladies were known as “perfected women” (*nüzhēn*), parallel to the term “perfected” (*zhēnren*) that is applied to men. But the term *zhēn*, which means “perfect,” “whole,” “authentic,” is sometimes replaced by its homophone *zhēn**, meaning “virtuous” or “chaste,” and occasionally the two words are used interchangeably (Despeux 1990, 32). Thus the *Kaihua zhēnjīng* (Perfect Scripture of Unfolding Transformation, DZ 1133) relates the virtues that a

¹¹ For more on Lady Wei, see Homann 1971, 19-21; Strickmann 1981, 142; Robinet 1984, 2:402; Cedzich 1987, 31-34; Despeux 1990, 56-60. On her cult, see Schafer 1977a). A Yuan-dynasty hagiography is found in *Lishi zhēnxian tīdào tóngjian hóuji* (Supplement to the Comprehensive Mirror of Perfected Immortals and Those Who Embody the Dao, DZ 298), 3.7a-8a. This text is henceforth referred to as *Tóngjian hóuji*.

“chaste woman” should cultivate—moral rectitude, filial piety, celibacy after being widowed—reflecting the qualities expected of women in traditional Chinese society, as already described in the *Nüjie* (Women’s Precepts).¹²

Following the female role models of traditional Chinese society, Highest Clarity Daoism encouraged sexual abstinence and favored a more detached role for women. Yet it preserved the theme of sexual intercourse as an initiation and rite of communion by transposing it into the realm of the supernatural (Bumbacher 2000a, 521). Yang Xi, the chief interlocutor for the perfected in the *Zhen’gao* (Declarations of the Perfected, DZ 1016), accordingly says:

When a perfected person is in the presence of a spirit-light companion, he must first prize the union with that light and the love between their two lights. Although they are called husband and wife, they do not practice marital acts. Speaking of them as a couple is merely a way of making understood that which can be revealed. But if the perfected person hangs on to ideas of the yellow and red [actual sex], he shall never see the supernatural spirits manifest themselves, nor have them for companions. (*Zhen’gao* 2.1a; Bumbacher 1998, 691; Despeux 1990, 58-59)

A set of technical instructions for this kind of union has adepts visualize the pure *qi* of the sun or the moon before their eyes, then imagine a goddess in its midst. The goddess grows stronger and more vivid with prolonged practice until she is felt present in the flesh. Pressing her mouth to the adept’s, she dispenses celestial vapors to increase his vitality and, after a long courtship and repeated visualizations, might even lie down with him—all in the service of communicating secret celestial knowledge and experiences (see Schafer 1978b). Another variation of this theme of interiorized sexuality was the adept’s visualization of the joining of interior yin and yang energies or of male and female divinities within the

¹² The *Nüjie* is a Han-dynasty text written by the female scholar Ban Zhao, considered the classic on feminine submission. See Gulik 1961, 98-103; Sung 1981; Kelleher 1987, 144-47; Mann 1991, 213-14; Paper 1997, 63-64; Raphals 1998, 236-46. For other works of instruction to women, see Raphals 1998, 246-57; Handlin 1975; Martin-Liao 1985.

body, such as the father of the Dao in the brain and the mother of the Dao in the kidneys.

Physical sexual practices were relegated to a minor rank and were no longer believed to lead to the highest level of realization. As the *Zhen'gao* says:

A person cannot attain immortality if he only knows the bedroom arts and the methods of guiding *qi*. One must acquire the methods of the divine elixir, which will suffice to become immortal. Even better, if one gets hold of the *Dadong zhenjing* (Perfect Scripture of Great Profundity), even the way of the golden elixir will become irrelevant. Reciting this text ten thousand times is the best way to become immortal. (5.11b)

In the Highest Clarity, the understanding of immortality shifted away from extended physical longevity and the acquisition of magical powers towards a refined existence in the heavens. For this, scriptural mastery and the proper meditations were much more important than gymnastics and *qi*-practices. In accordance with this shift, the school had an ambiguous attitude towards sexuality, partly opposing the Celestial Masters. According to the *Zhen'gao*, the Lady of Purple Tenuity exclaims:

The way of the yellow and the red, the art of commingling *qi*, constitutes one of the minor methods commended for becoming one of the elected as espoused by [the first Celestial Master] Zhang Daoling. The perfected [of Highest Clarity] do not make use of such practices. Although I have observed some people interrupting their decline by practicing these methods, I have never met anyone who has attained eternal life through them. (2.1a)

In Highest Clarity, the physical harmonization of yin and yang was therefore no longer sufficient for the attainment of immortality. Women as a result were seen less as consorts and sexual partners and more as aspects of celestial power who could reveal and teach the secrets of the Dao and who would communicate, closely but not necessarily sexually, with mortal seekers. This role was actively continued throughout the Tang dynasty, when numerous poems attest to the quest of the goddess pursued by Daoists and other seekers (see Cahill 1985; Hawkes 1967).

Founders and Religious Leaders

In the Tang and later dynasties, more and more women took holy orders and joined the religion, populating 550 convents among 1,687 Daoist institutions. Women underwent ordination into the same ranks and through the same ceremonies as men, and acquired the same status. They served both as priests in ritual functions and as nuns to pursue their own personal cultivation, remaining withdrawn and celibate yet also interacting with the society around them. Women from all areas of life joined convents, and Daoism in this period offered a genuine alternative to the mainstream model of women's lives.

Women were also venerated as prophets, healers, mediums, and shamanic travelers to the otherworld. They founded various new movements within the religion and served as matriarchs and leaders of existing ones. In the eighth century, when Daoism began to integrate various local cults—particularly in the maritime and central regions of the east and south—divine women of various sorts, such as goddesses of rivers and mountains, shamans, and cultic founders, grew in stature and often became objects of pilgrimages undertaken equally by men and women (see Schafer 1973).

One example of the development of a local cult under female auspices comes from the school of Pure Subtlety (Qingwei) and its first leader, the Tang priest Zu Shu (fl. 889-904; see Ren 1990, 565-66). After receiving ordination in various Daoist levels, she went to Guiyang where she met the Holy Mother of Numinous Radiance (Lingguang shengmu) who transmitted to her the Way of Pure Subtlety together with techniques of talismans and exorcism. Later followers placed Zu Shu at the head of their ancestral lineage, which was constructed in the thirteenth century (see Despeux 2000a, 390; Boltz 1987, 38-39).

In the Song dynasty, a popular cult grew around the Lady Near the Waters (Linshui furen). Originally named Chen Jinggu, she was born in 767 and, despite being gifted with supernatural powers, died young and pregnant at the age of twenty-four during a rain-making ritual. Her powers began to manifest after her death and she gradually grew into the protector of women, children, and boy mediums. Her cult first de-

veloped in her home state of Min (Fujian), then spread widely under the Song. Followers were magicians, controllers of demons, exorcists, and healers who could undertake shamanic travels to the otherworld. As the cult grew, local Daoists and literati adopted it and it still continues in Taiwan (see Berthier 1988; Despeux 2000a, 391).

Another senior women practitioner of the period was Cao Wenyi (fl. 1119-1125), a renowned poet and author of the *Dadao ge* (Song of the Great Dao), whose fame reached the ears of Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1126) and earned her an invitation to the capital and a formal title. She wrote commentaries to various Daoist texts and was frequently lauded as a “master of tranquility and humane virtue and the perfection of the Dao.” Also known as a follower of inner alchemy, she was later venerated by several Qing-dynasty lineages, notably that of Purity and Tranquility (Qingjing pai). This is evident in her appearances at spirit-writing séances and in various inscriptions preserved in the Baiyun guan (White Cloud Temple) in Beijing.

In the late twelfth century, with the Song dynasty under attack by Central Asian forces, the school of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen) arose, its founders openly presenting themselves to the aristocracy as practitioners who would save Chinese culture from the invasion of the barbarians. Women in this school served variously as abbots of major temples, wives or mothers of leading adepts, and key members of local associations. Among its first seven masters there was also a woman, Sun Buer (1119-1182).

Born into a powerful local Shandong family, she received a literary education and was married to Ma Yu (1123-1183), better known as Ma Danyang, and also called “Ma Who Had Half the Prefecture.” The couple had three sons and lived in peaceful obscurity until 1167 when the founder Wang Chongyang visited the area. Converted to his creed, they became active disciples and Sun grew to be leader of the local Ninghai association, under the Hall of the Golden Lotus (Jinlian tang). Her merits earned her the Daoist title Serene One of Purity and Tranquility (Qingjing sanren), and she received the third and highest level of Complete Perfection ordination, becoming a senior leader with the right to teach and ordain (Despeux 2000a, 392). Her cult grew over later dynasties.

In these representative cases, women attained high levels of religious standing due to their merit and devotion to Daoist beliefs and practices. They worked closely with men and benefited from possessing mediumistic and healing powers. Honored for their potential motherhood, and spiritual competence, they were seen as valuable assets of the Dao, seats of internal seeds of perfection, and holders of the divine tradition of immortals.

Inner Alchemy

A special women's cultivation is found in the tradition of inner alchemy (*neidan*), the dominant form of Daoist practice since the Song dynasty and a key technique of Complete Perfection.¹³ Ever since the early middle ages, Daoists had devoted themselves to the quest for immortality. Along with meditations and the enhancement of *qi*, they pursued laboratory or operative alchemy (*jindan*, "golden cinnabar") on the basis of mineral and vegetable ingredients. In the Tang, they moved dominantly towards internal cultivation, using alchemical vocabulary and processes to express their vision. Inner alchemy, the result of this shift, sought to obtain immortality through psychophysiological methods using the ingredients of the body. Through the union of opposites and a sequence of transmutations, the adept would reunite the two poles of life that combine to form the material and spiritual worlds. Returning from worldly multiplicity to the oneness of the Dao, adepts would achieve mystical fusion and attain the eternal life of the spirit.

Since the Song dynasty, there have been several alchemical traditions. Some combined outer and inner alchemy, others distinguished an outer and an inner phase. Many continued the visualizations of Highest Clarity expressed in alchemical terms. Generally the female body was seen as an ideal receptacle of inner alchemical transformation. Women practitioners essentially followed the same process as men, but they began the

¹³ On inner alchemy, see Needham et al. 1983; Robinet 1989b; 1995; Lu 1970; Cleary 1987; 1992; Wilhelm 1984; Baldrian-Hussein 1994; Baryosher-Chemouny 1996; Skar and Pregadio 2000.

practices from a different starting point and had an advantage as progress set in. Their specific needs and moves, moreover, gave rise to special practices for women known as women's inner alchemy (*nüdan*).

Inner alchemy in many ways continued to use the basic methods of ancient Daoism: reverting sexual energies to nurture the brain, circulating *qi* inside the body, cultivating the three cinnabar fields (in abdomen, chest, and head) and the five organs, concentrating on key energy points in the body, and meditating on innate nature. It adopted these methods through the Chinese system of symbolic correlation, placing the phases of evolution from the Dao in direct correspondence with the alchemical process of refining gold.

The transmutations of inner alchemy involved three bodily energies—sexual fluid or essence (*jing*), vital energy (*qi*) and spirit (*shen*)—in a process of inversion and return to the Dao (Pregadio and Skar 2000, 488). In the first stage, the adepts join the various opposite (yin and yang) forces in the interior of their body and through them form an divine pearl which grows into an embryo of *qi*. The second stage consists of ten months of symbolic pregnancy, at the end of which the embryo is birthed as a being of light. The birth takes place through the top of the head, because the alchemical process inverts the course of ordinary procedures. In the third stage, this luminous spirit learns to freely leave and enter the body. It is further sublimated and eventually merges completely with cosmic emptiness.

As documented in texts on women's alchemy that arose in late imperial China, differences between the sexes occur only in the first of these three stages. Instead of refining semen by "subduing white tiger" (*fu baihu*) and transforming it into *qi*, women refine their menstrual blood, the "red dragon," by progressively diminishing its flow and eventually stopping it altogether. This is known as "decapitating the red dragon" (*zhan chi-long*) and is first mentioned in a text of the year 1310. The cessation of the menstrual flow identifies the adept as both pregnant and prepubescent. Menstrual blood in analogy to the men's semen is sublimated and brings forth a "new blood," which certain texts call the "marrow of the white phoenix" (*baifeng sui*).

Both this term and the expressions “red dragon” and “white tiger” transpose ordinary body fluids to a new and higher level of spiritual power. When the texts wish to indicate the physical substance commonly discharged during intercourse or menstruation, they use ordinary or medical terms, such as *jing*, “semen,” *yuexue*, “monthly blood,” or *yue-shui*, “monthly flow.” As the system does not allow a rupture between matter and spirit, the new symbolic language implies that both a physiological and spiritual transformation takes place, so that in effect the decapitation of the red dragon is physically present as the complete cessation of the menstrual flow (Despeux 2000a, 406). This signals great progress towards the attainment of immortality, the first major step in the return to oneness with the Dao, the initial recovery of primordial energy and inherent cosmic power. In this practice as much as in their roles as goddesses, representatives of yin, divine teachers, and renunciants, women in Daoism are ideally successful practitioners of the Dao who contribute significantly to its purity and activation on earth.

Daoist Women and Chinese Society

Daoism in the course of its history has had a multifaceted and complex relationship with women and the feminine. Following mainstream Confucian society, it accorded great honor to mothers and matrons and placed high value on fecundity, nurturing, caring, and other aspects associated with motherhood. It also followed the Confucian lead in placing married women secondary to their husbands, barring them from joining convents and allowing their initiation into the registers of the Celestial Masters only with the husband’s consent.

Daughters similarly were treated in traditional ways and could only join a Daoist association or convent with their family’s consent. Since ordination involved not only social changes but financial obligations and pledges, the family was accorded great importance. While daughters of non-Daoist households were known to join the Dao, for the most part young women who developed religious intentions came from a Daoist background and continued the family tradition in their own way. Still, whether of Daoist heritage or not, the religion clearly recognized the

possibility that young girls might have spiritual potential and aspirations beyond marriage, and offered them a viable institutional alternative to staying within the confines of male governance. This alternative, moreover, was justified—not unlike in comparable Buddhist arguments (see Cole 1998)—with the notion that the truest and most potent form of filial piety and family service was to care for the otherworldly wellbeing of the ancestors and work for the living through intercession with the gods. Having a daughter join a Daoist institution was thus acceptable and in some cases even desirable

While Daoism had little impact on the lives of wives and mothers and offered limited opportunities for spiritually gifted daughters, it made a substantial difference for widows and divorcees. Often shunned by mainstream society, they found an active role as priests and nuns of the religion, which allowed them to attain ranks equal with those of men and live a life of comparative independence and freedom. Similarly, expelled concubines, former courtesans, and aging entertainers could find refuge and a new lease on life inside the Daoist organization, shifting their focus away from worldly involvement and towards the attainment of inner peace. No longer accountable to either parents or husband, these liminal figures posed a threat to Confucian order but offered great opportunity for the Dao. Mature, competent, and often with means of their own, they established convents, served as priests and healers, and contributed greatly to the shaping of Daoist organizations.

All these Daoist women looked to certain ideals in the shaping of their ideas and practices. Presented in myths, immortals' tales, historical records, and visions of the female body, these ideals show how Daoist women conceived of themselves and how they continued to grow towards greater harmony and oneness with the Dao.