

INTRODUCTION

This book introduces the earliest identifiable tradition in the history of Chinese alchemy. Named after the celestial domain from which its teachings had descended and to which they promised ascent, the Taiqing, or Great Clarity, legacy flourished between the third and the fourth centuries in Jiangnan, the region south of the lower Yangzi River. While earlier documents yield fragmentary evidence on the origins of alchemy in China, the extant Taiqing sources provide details on the doctrines, rites, techniques, and aims of *waidan*, or “external alchemy,” and on its relation to contemporary religious traditions.

Like the other Chinese alchemical texts, the Taiqing scriptures use the alchemical metaphor to reveal how existence is related to the Dao, and how an adept can attain an understanding of the principles at the basis of that relationship. They do so, however, in a way different from the greater part of the later and better-known *waidan* texts, on which most studies have focused so far. The later texts ascribe a major role to the system of correlative cosmology; using a large set of abstract emblems, they provide adepts with an abstract model of the cosmos designed to illustrate its underlying principles. These texts document traditions that were established between the late fifth and the early sixth centuries, culminated between the seventh and the tenth centuries, and underwent a slow but steady decline afterward, when *neidan*, or “inner alchemy,” replaced them. The Taiqing scriptures represent an earlier variety of *waidan*. While the underlying doctrinal principles are the same as those of the later tradition, their basic framework is not provided by the notions and emblems of correlative cosmology, which

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they virtually ignore, but by the rites and ceremonies they enjoin adepts to perform at every stage of the practice.¹

Origins and Early Transmission

Looking at how the Taiqing tradition arose, developed, and declined requires, first of all, the identification of relevant sources among those included in the Daoist Canon (*Daozang*). The extant *waidan* corpus consists of about one hundred texts, many of which claim to record doctrines and practices of the high antiquity. Dating issues have long been one of the main hindrances in the study of this literature, as most texts are either anonymous and undated, or bear attributions and dates that are meaningful within the tradition but are historically unreliable. Much work is still required in this area along the lines suggested in two remarkable contributions by Ho Peng Yoke and Chen Guofu.² At present, no more than one-fifth of the surviving *waidan* texts can be dated with an acceptable degree of reliability and accuracy; for many of the others, even the dynasty during which they were written is not assuredly known.³

Research on the history of Chinese alchemy, therefore, must be based on the preliminary identification of cognate groups of sources that display common features and may broadly be assigned the same date. For the early stages of the tradition, no other work helps in this task as much as the *Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature* (*Baopu zi neipian*), completed by Ge Hong (283–343) around 317 and revised around 330. The evidence that this work provides for the study of early *waidan* will be discussed later in the present book.⁴ Suffice it to note here that *waidan* is the main subject of two of the *Inner Chapters*, one of which is mostly concerned with methods based on minerals and plants, and the other mostly with methods centered on metals. According to Ge Hong, the ritual background of all those methods was similar, but the respective texts belonged to separate lineages.⁵

While the sources quoted in the chapter on metals are otherwise unknown, the other chapter highlights three scriptures that had been in the Ge family's possession for about one century, and that Ge Hong deemed to be central to the tradition into which he had been initiated.⁶ Their origin and transmission to about 300 CE are related in a well-known passage of the *Inner Chapters*, which describes them as derived from a revelation granted by an

anonymous divine being (*shenren*) to a “master of the methods,” or *fangshi*, around 200 CE:

A long time ago, while Zuo Yuanfang (i.e., Zuo Ci) was devoting himself to meditation practices on Mount Tianzhu (Tianzhu shan, in present-day Anhui), a divine being transmitted to him the scriptures of the immortals on the Golden Elixirs. It was the time of the disorders at the end of the Han dynasty, and as Zuo had no opportunity to compound those elixirs, he escaped to the east of the [Changjiang] River with the intent of settling on a famous mountain to devote himself to that Way. My granduncle, the Immortal Lord (Xiangong, i.e., Ge Xuan), received from him those texts, namely the *Scripture of the Elixirs of Great Clarity* in three scrolls, the *Scripture of the Elixirs of the Nine Tripods* in one scroll, and the *Scripture of the Elixir of the Golden Liquor* also in one scroll. My master, Zheng [Yin], was a disciple of my granduncle, and in turn received those texts from him. But his family was poor, and he lacked the means to buy the ingredients. I served him for a long time as a disciple. Then I built an altar (*tan*) on the Maji mountains (in present-day Jiangxi) and, after swearing a covenant, I received those texts with oral instructions that cannot be written down. (*Baopu zi*, 4.71)

The three texts, adds Ge Hong, were unknown to most contemporary practitioners (*daoshi*) in Jiangnan or elsewhere.

The *Scripture of Great Clarity* (*Taiqing jing*), the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* (*Jiudan jing*), and the *Scripture of the Golden Liquor* (*Jinye jing*) form the nucleus of the Taiqing doctrinal and textual legacy. Quotations, paraphrases, and summaries of these texts in the *Inner Chapters* enable us to identify and authenticate their present versions in the Daoist Canon. The received texts describe methods for making about a dozen different elixirs and provide information—often supplemented by other sources, including the *Inner Chapters* itself—on the doctrinal, technical, and ritual features of the Taiqing tradition.⁷

ZUO CI, GE XUAN, AND ZHENG YIN

While there is no evidence to suggest that the Taiqing tradition of alchemy was a creation of Ge Hong’s kin, his family certainly played an important role in the preservation and the spreading of the Taiqing texts during the third and the early fourth centuries. Virtually all we know about the early transmission of the Taiqing corpus is what we gather from the passage of the *Inner Chapters* quoted above, which is not contradicted by any historically

reliable source. Based on Ge Hong's account, the three scriptures originated in the area of Mount Tianzhu at the end of the second century. The alleged first recipient, Zuo Ci, gave them to Ge Xuan (164–244), then they were transmitted to Zheng Yin (?–ca. 302), and finally they reached Ge Xuan's grandnephew, Ge Hong. As we shall see, different hagiographic lines of transmission were devised about one century later, when *waidan* was partially incorporated into the corpus of one of the main Daoist schools of the Six Dynasties; the *Inner Chapters*, however, is the main source to provide us with historical details.⁸

In the same chapter containing the passage on transmission quoted above, Ge Hong states that the Taiqing scriptures “did not exist east of the [Changjiang] River” (i.e., the Yangzi River) before Zuo Ci took them there at the end of the Han period.⁹ This statement raises the question of where the scriptures, and the tradition that they represent, originated. Among several mountains that have been called Tianzhu (Pillar of Heaven) in different times and in different regions of China, one is part of the Taishan range in the Shandong peninsula in the northeast, and some scholars have identified this as the site in which the Taiqing revelations occurred.¹⁰ In Ge Hong's time, however, Tianzhu was also an alternative name of Mount Qian (Qianshan), which Emperor Wu of the Han had designated as the southernmost of the five sacred peaks (*wuyue*) in 106 BCE. Given the proximity of this mountain to Zuo Ci's reputed birthplace in Lujiang (present-day Anhui), it is very likely that Mount Qian is the mountain referred to as Tianzhu in the passage quoted above. This identification appears to be confirmed by Ge Hong's statement that the Taiqing scriptures “did not exist east of the River,” a phrase that seems to imply that Zuo Ci took those scriptures with him across the Changjiang when he left Mount Tianzhu.¹¹

Other sources concerning the “master of the methods” Zuo Ci do not offer significant historical details on the origins of the Taiqing tradition, for Zuo is as shadowy a figure as most other early *fangshi*.¹² Pseudo-historical and hagiographic records depict him not only as an alchemist but also as proficient in the divinatory arts, competent in summoning gods and controlling demons, and gifted in undergoing metamorphosis. His hagiographic account in the *History of the Later Han Dynasty* (*Hou Hanshu*) shares several features with the one in the *Biographies of the Divine Immortals* (*Shenxian zhuan*) but does not include the passage on the transmission of the al-

chemical scriptures found in the latter work. Here Zuo is portrayed as finding the Taiqing texts in a cave of Mount Tianzhu:

Zuo Ci, whose cognomen was Yuanfang, came from Lujiang. He had a deep knowledge of the Five Classics and was versed in astrology (*xingqi*). As he realized that the prosperity of the Han dynasty was declining, and that disorder would soon rise in the empire, . . . he devoted himself to the study of the Dao. He became an expert in divination according to the method of the Six Decades (*liujia*), and could command gods and demons; while sitting in meditation, he could summon the Traveling Cuisine (*xingchu*). While he was devoting himself to meditation practices on Mount Tianzhu, he found the scriptures on the Nine Elixirs and the Golden Liquor in a cave.¹³ (*Shenxian zhuan*, in *Taiping guangji*, 11.76–78)

Having heard of Zuo Ci, the *Biographies* continues, Cao Cao (155–220), the King of Wei, summoned him to the capital, Luoyang, where he performed the magical feats narrated in the *Biographies*, the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, and several other sources.¹⁴

Ge Hong's granduncle, Ge Xuan, is another elusive figure despite the major posthumous role that he plays in the history of Six Dynasties Daoism as the putative first recipient of the Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) scriptures. His depiction, found in different sources, as a practitioner of several disciplines associated with the milieu of the "masters of the methods"—who are represented, in Ge Hong's account, by Zuo Ci—suggests that the three Taiqing scriptures may indeed have become part of the treasures of the Ge family through him.¹⁵ As for Zheng Yin, while there is no reason to doubt that he took part in the early transmission of the Taiqing scriptures, his role is not entirely clear. Although Ge Hong calls him a "disciple" (*dizi*) of Ge Xuan, presumably he did not literally receive the Taiqing texts from Ge Xuan only to pass them down to Ge Hong, since those texts were already in the possession of the Ge family. More likely, Zheng Yin was the master who provided Ge Hong with the required "oral instructions" (*koujue*) on the Taiqing and other texts, and who formally transmitted the three alchemical scriptures mentioned above to his disciple—then aged about eighteen—around the year 300, as Ge Hong relates in the passage quoted above.¹⁶

All we know about the beginnings of Taiqing tradition, therefore, is that it originated in present-day eastern Anhui around 200 CE, and was soon transmitted to the nearby region across the Changjiang River. Apparently

the three main scriptures took form, or at least were initially transmitted, within the milieu of the *fangshi*, the “masters of the methods.” If this indication is correct, *waidan* participated in the progressive eastward transmission of elements of early religious culture from the Chu region to the coastal areas that culminated, in the fourth century, with the revelation of the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) scriptures.

ALCHEMICAL TEXTS IN THE SHANGQING CORPUS

The Taiqing texts present alchemy as superior to other practices such as circulating breath (*xingqi*), ingesting herbal drugs, and abstaining from cereals; they state that while these practices afford only the extension of one’s life span, the alchemical teachings make it possible to rise to a higher spiritual rank.¹⁷ The *Inner Chapters* of Ge Hong and other sources, as we shall see, reiterate this claim, adding that meditation is, with alchemy, the only practice that gives access to transcendence and immortality.

Despite this claim, the Taiqing tradition represents, both doctrinally and historically, an intermediate stage between the earlier and the later religious legacies of Jiangnan. After the Taiqing scriptures began to circulate in Jiangnan, the first important development that affected the history of Chinese alchemy was the creation of the Shangqing corpus of revealed scriptures in the second half of the fourth century, no more than fifty years after Ge Hong had completed his *Inner Chapters*.¹⁸ Presenting itself as the result of a revelation issued from a heaven higher than the Great Clarity, as its name also implies, Shangqing brought forth a new hierarchical arrangement of the southeastern religious practices and their historical or legendary representatives. Emphasizing inner meditation and visualization, it placed other techniques, including alchemy, at a lower level in its ranking of doctrines and methods. This phenomenon, as we shall see later in this Introduction, and in more detail in the following chapters, was the point of departure for a series of changes within the religious traditions of Jiangnan that provide clues to understand the relation of Taiqing alchemy to medieval Daoism.

At the same time, though, Shangqing also integrated several features of the earlier southern traditions into its own doctrines and practices, and incorporated some of their texts into its own revealed literature. The best-known instance of integration of earlier methods concerns the meditation and visualization techniques described in the *Scripture of the Yellow Court* (*Huangting jing*), a third-century work that represents the human being as

home to a multitude of divinities. Shangqing took those techniques as a model for some of its own meditation practices, and accepted the *Yellow Court* into its own scriptural corpus.¹⁹ An analogous process occurred with two alchemical works, the *Scripture of the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles* (*Jiuzhuan huandan jing*) and the *Scripture of the Elixir Flower of Langgan* (*Langgan huadan jing*). Although both texts appear to have been unknown to Ge Hong, and no definite detail is available on their provenance, many of their technical, ritual, linguistic, and stylistic peculiarities are shared with the texts of the Taiqing tradition. The ease with which one can isolate within them the portions exclusively concerned with *waidan* from those containing typically Shangqing features—especially mentions of Shangqing deities and descriptions of Shangqing meditation practices—suggests that their present form results from a process of transmission and adaptation that is common in the history of Daoism: earlier writings were modified or expanded as they were incorporated into the Shangqing corpus, leaving their original core untouched.²⁰

The analogies between the two *waidan* texts received in the Shangqing corpus (more precisely, in the case of the *Elixir Flower of Langgan*, of the *waidan* portion of this text) with the three main Taiqing scriptures mentioned by Ge Hong suggest that they originally were part of a single legacy. For this reason, both the *Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles* and the *Elixir Flower of Langgan* count among the main sources of the present study. Besides them, the survey of the Taiqing tradition presented in this book also includes commentaries, anthologies, and other writings closely related to the original scriptures that testify to the expansion of the Taiqing corpus through the mid-eighth century, when this legacy declined, leaving its place to other bodies of alchemical doctrine and practice.²¹

Main Features of Taiqing Alchemy

With few exceptions, the Taiqing texts follow a regular pattern in presenting their alchemical recipes. Using a terse language and a consistent terminology, they first give details on the technical features of each method, focusing on the preliminary treatment of the ingredients, the preparation of the crucible, the heating process, and the collection of the elixir. At the end of the method, they describe the benefits gained from its performance. This pattern allows one to observe how adepts conceived the results of compound-

ing the elixirs and the effects of ingesting them. The Taiqing alchemical medicines were valued for two reasons. First, they granted transcendence and immortality; second, they made it possible—even with no need of ingesting them—to summon benevolent gods and expel demons and other causes of various disturbances, including illness and death.

On the other hand, the Taiqing texts devote little or no space to doctrinal statements and to illustrations of the principles on which they are based. In particular, although they occasionally contain methods designed to reproduce basic cosmological patterns such as Yin-Yang and the Five Agents (*wuxing*), they do not rely on the system of correlative cosmology to formulate the import of the alchemical work. Various other cosmological emblems, notably the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), that in later sources contribute to fashion the alchemical discourse in both its doctrinal and practical aspects are entirely neglected here.

The emphasis accorded to the performance of methods places the Taiqing scriptures among the *waidan* sources which, in the words of Nathan Sivin, “consist only of instructions for laboratory operations, with no attempt to provide a theoretical rationale.”²² But while the Taiqing texts are primarily concerned with operational details, one should not conclude that the absence of cosmological theories reflects a “technological” tendency. Despite their apparent silence, as we shall see, the Taiqing texts contain clear allusions to their doctrinal foundations. Correlative cosmology, moreover, entered *waidan* only from the early Tang period onward. Until then, ritual—an hitherto largely neglected component of Chinese alchemy, especially in its earlier stages—was the explicit counterpart of the techniques, and served the function of framing doctrines and techniques into a practice.²³

THE ELIXIR

In the later Chinese alchemical tradition, the emblems of correlative cosmology play two main roles closely related to each other. First, they represent the ontological states that intervene between the Dao and the cosmos, or between unity, duality, and the various other stages of propagation of Original Pnuma (*yuanqi*) into the multiplicity of the “ten thousand things.” Several patterns of cosmological emblems are used in order to show how space, time, multiplicity, and change are related to the spacelessness, timelessness, non-duality, and constancy of the Dao. The Five Agents, for instance, are described as unfolding from the invisible Center, which runs through them “endowing

them with its efficacy,” similar to a bellows that provides energy for the cosmic process to occur.²⁴ In their second role, the emblems of correlative cosmology serve to formulate the relation of the alchemical practice to the doctrinal principles. For instance, the trigrams of the *Book of Changes* illustrate how the alchemical process consists of extracting the pre-cosmic Real Yin (*zhenyin*) and Real Yang (*zhenyang*) from Yang and Yin as they appear in the cosmos, respectively, and in joining them to produce the elixir, which represents their original oneness.²⁵

Correlative cosmology, therefore, is the main tool used in the later alchemical texts to formulate the import of the elixir as symbolic both of the original state of being that underlies multiplicity and change and of the attainment of that state by the adept. The Taiqing texts, instead, do not avail themselves of correlative cosmology either to express doctrinal points or to explicate the meaning of their techniques. Their doctrinal foundations are hinted at by the emphasis they give to certain aspects of the alchemical process, however—in particular, by the endless statements on the necessity of hermetically luting the crucible, by the painstaking instructions concerning the mud to be used for this purpose, and by the technical terminology used in these descriptions. These details show that, despite the difference in formulations, the Taiqing notion of “elixir” is the same as the one underlying the later sources.

This notion is discussed elsewhere in this book, but the main points deserve attention here. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 4, the crucible is the main tool of the Taiqing alchemist from a symbolic, ritual, and technical point of view. The Taiqing texts instruct their adepts to lute the vessel with several layers of mud before it is placed in the furnace. These instructions recur, in similar forms, in all Taiqing works; they are sometimes reiterated within a single text, to the point of taking up altogether more than half of the *Scripture of the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles*. Besides serving the practical purpose of preventing the vessel from breaking when it is heated, the two main muds used for luting the crucible also play important symbolic functions. The first is called Mysterious and Yellow (*xuanhuang*), a name that is emblematic of Heaven (the “mysterious”) and Earth (the “yellow”), or Yin and Yang. It is made of lead and mercury, and sometimes is also placed inside the crucible above and below the main ingredients. Through the Mysterious and Yellow, the crucible and the elixir incorporate the essences of Yin and Yang joined together. The second mud is called the Mud of the Six-and-

One (*liuyi ni*). It is typically made of seven ingredients, but is said to have this name even when it is obtained from a different number of substances. The function played by this mud is even more important than that played by the Mysterious and Yellow. Symbolically, the Mud of Six-and-One closes the seven openings in the “body” of original Chaos that, in an account that will be examined later in this book, are said to be caused by the emergence of Yin and Yang and, thus, to result in the emergence of the cosmos.

The Mysterious and Yellow and the Mud of the Six-and-One, therefore, re-create within the crucible the state in which Yin and Yang are still joined to each other, and in which differentiation and multiplicity have not yet emerged. In that medium, under the action of fire, the ingredients of the elixir are transmuted, or “reverted” (*huan*), into their “essence” (*jing*), which coagulates itself under the upper part of the crucible. One of the Taiqing texts calls this essence the “precious treasure” (*chongbao*) of the ingredients. The commentary to the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* describes it as being equivalent to the “essence” (*jing*) that the Dao spontaneously issues to give origin to existence.²⁶

THE ROLE OF RITUAL

The notions summarized above are part of the doctrinal foundations of Taiqing alchemy, and constitute the aspect that distinguishes it from all other ritual or self-cultivation practices. To understand how the Taiqing legacy became part of the religious traditions of Jiangnan, developed in close relation to them, and finally was demoted when new doctrinal and textual corpora gained prominence in that region, instead we have to look at the ritual nature of the arts of the elixirs, and at their promise of granting transcendence and immortality.

Consideration of two points helps us to find initial orientation in approaching these issues. First, the decisive element that enabled Taiqing alchemy to develop in the Jiangnan region was the belief that compounding and ingesting the alchemical medicines—or merely using them as ritual objects and apotropaic talismans—provide the same benefits attributed to other methods: the elixirs afford the power of summoning gods, expelling demons, healing illnesses, and prolonging life. Second, at the same time but apparently in contradiction to the previous feature, the Taiqing texts define their own doctrines and practices as superior to any other teaching or method. Taiqing alchemy, in other words, credited itself with a twofold sta-

tus: the elixirs granted all the advantages offered by other practices, but also promised something beyond their reach. The heaven of Great Clarity represented, for the followers of the Taiqing teachings, the highest celestial domain, and the elixirs were the keys to obtain access to it; other practices (those which Ge Hong qualifies as “minor arts,” *xiaoshu*), were largely or even entirely irrelevant, because the elixirs also dispensed their benefits. The only method of self-cultivation as exalted as alchemy was meditation, for visualizing the inner gods provided the same benefits as compounding the elixirs.²⁷

Before we examine how the two seemingly contradictory claims mentioned above are related to each other, we should briefly look at how the Taiqing texts frame the alchemical process into a sequence of ritual actions, and how they formulate their promise of immortality. As I show in Chapter 5, compounding an elixir is part of a larger process that consists of several stages, each of which is marked by the performance of rites and ceremonies. It is this process, and not merely heating the ingredients in the crucible, that constitutes the alchemical practice. Receiving the scriptures and the oral instructions, building the laboratory, kindling the fire, and ingesting the elixirs all require offering pledges to one’s master and to the gods, observing rules on seclusion and purification, performing ceremonies to establish and protect the ritual area, and making invocations to the highest deities. Instead of being seen as mere appendages to the alchemical work, these ritual acts are deemed to be as essential to achieving an elixir as are the ingredients:

If the ingredients are utterly pure, and if you duly perform the purification practices, observe the precepts, and cultivate yourself dwelling in deep retirement and attaining to a state of clarity and tranquility, this divine and wondrous method will never fail. (*Jiuzhuan huandan jing yaojue*, 5a)

The performance of rites was actually part of alchemy’s secrecy: ordinary people, says Ge Hong, are not allowed to hear anything about the elixirs precisely because their compounding involves making ceremonies in honor of the highest deities.²⁸

The transmission ceremony of the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* reproduces the rite celebrated at the beginning of human history by the Yellow Emperor, when he transmitted the text to the Mysterious Master (Xuanzi). After the disciple makes an oath, the master receives tokens from him, and asks the Mysterious Woman (Xuannü, the deity who gave the scripture to

the Yellow Emperor) permission to hand down the alchemical methods. If the goddess gives a sign of consent—a clear sky and the absence of wind—the master may pass on the text and the oral instructions. Then the adept retires to a mountain or a secluded place with one or more attendants. He performs the purification practices (*zhai*) with his helpers, making ablutions and observing the precepts. After he demarcates the space of his work, purifies it from noxious influences, and protects it with talismans (*fu*) and seals (*yin*), he builds a laboratory (the Chamber of the Elixirs, *danshi*) at the center of the consecrated area. Only he and his attendants may enter the alchemical *sanctum*.

Then, using traditional systems of calendrical computation, the adept chooses a suitable time to begin the compounding. When the purification practices are accomplished, and when all spatial and temporal conditions are fulfilled, the fire may be started. In the *Nine Elixirs*, this stage also is marked by a request for assistance addressed to the gods. The adept offers food and drink to them, asking that they watch over the practice and ensure its success. Now the alchemist's attention focuses on the crucible, and he compounds the elixir following the directions found in the texts and the instructions received from his master. At the end, according to a passage of the *Scripture of Great Clarity* quoted by Ge Hong, he performs another rite offering different quantities of the elixir to several deities. Finally, he ingests the elixir at dawn, after paying homage again to the gods.

THE PROMISE OF IMMORTALITY

Having ingested the medicine that he has prepared, the adept “becomes a divine immortal and transcends the generations [of mortals],” “rises into the Void,” “roams in the Great Clarity, and in one instant tours the eight poles,” “ascends riding the clouds, and rises to heaven.”²⁹ This attainment is often stated simply by saying that ingesting a certain amount of an elixir turns an adept into an immortal. In the *Nine Elixirs*, for instance, “by swallowing one pill a day for one hundred days you will become a divine immortal,” and “ingesting one pill a day after your meal, you will become an immortal in ten days.”³⁰ In the *Flower of Langgan*, “one ounce forms a dose to become an immortal.”³¹ In other instances, the descriptions are more embroidered and detailed. By ingesting the alchemical medicines, as is said in the received text of the *Scripture of the Golden Liquor*, an adept not only gains immor-

tality but also receives an appointment in the celestial bureaucracy, becoming an assistant to the highest deities:

If you take one ounce each of Gold Water (*jinshui*, i.e., the Golden Liquor) and Mercury Water (*hongshui*), and drink them facing the sun, you immediately will become a Golden Man (*jinren*). Your body will be radiant and will grow feathers and wings. On high you will put in motion the Original Essence (*yuanjing*) on behalf of [the god of] the Central Yellow (Zhong-huang) and of the Great One (Taiyi). If you drink half an ounce each of Gold Water [and Mercury Water], you will live a long life without end.³² (*Shenxian jinzhuo jing*, 1.7a–b)

Another elaborate account is found in the *Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles*. Here the accomplishment of the alchemical work is preliminary to the adept's attainment of transcendence. Having ingested the elixir that he has compounded, the adept rises to heaven, and only then is he presented with the authentic alchemical medicine, namely the Golden Elixir (*jindan*):

Two ounces forms one dose. Ingest it at dawn with pure water, facing the sun. You will be able to dissolve your form becoming invisible and to fly soaring to the Great Void. An envoy of the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) will welcome you with the Golden Elixir and the Winged-Wheel [Chariot]. You will multiply your form and transform your shadow, making them into thousands of white cranes. You will rise to the heaven of Great Tenuity (Taiwei) and will receive the rank of a Perfected Immortal (*zhenxian*). Your longevity will equal that of the Three Luminaries (*sanguang*); you will revert to youth and move away from old age. Your complexion will shine like jade, and in one instant you will obtain a radiant spiritual force (*yaoling*). Such indeed is the power of the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles.³³ (*Jiuzhuan huandan jing yaojue*, 3b)

Whether attaining transcendence is imagined as becoming a “divine immortal” or as entering the ranks of the gods, all Taiqing texts include it among the benefits of the elixir. The promise of immortality played an important role in enhancing the prestige of alchemy among the other traditions of Jiangnan.

ALCHEMY, RITUAL, AND LOCAL TRADITIONS

In his summary of the Taiqing texts, Ge Hong quotes a passage from the *Scripture of Great Clarity* not found in any extant source of the Taiqing corpus, which asserts that “the Way of long life does not consist in making cer-

emonies or carrying out services to gods and demons.”³⁴ If this sentence came from one of the later *waidan* texts, which emphasize the symbolic aspects of the alchemical process, we might interpret it as meaning that one’s attention should focus not on the rites themselves, but on how the compounding of the elixirs makes it possible to reproduce the impersonal principles that govern the cosmos, with no need of performing “services to gods and demons.”³⁵ Being quoted as coming from the central Taiqing scripture, however, these words distinctly conflict with the multitude of major and minor ritual acts that all Taiqing texts enjoin adepts to perform.

This conflict is another aspect of the twofold status of alchemy, and reflects the two levels at which the alchemical process is understood in the Taiqing tradition. On the one hand, making and ingesting an elixir allow one to approach the gods, communicate with them, and even be admitted into their ranks. Achieving this goal requires an adept to perform the methods in conditions of ritual purity and with the deities’ consent and protection. The stages of the alchemical process that precede and follow the heating of the ingredients in the crucible are all performed for this purpose. On the other hand, the alchemical process reveals the original state of the cosmos, and the purified matter of the elixir is the visible token of the “essence” issued from the Dao, from which the entire existence evolves. The sentence quoted by Ge Hong from the *Scripture of Great Clarity* shows that this was the aspect of their work that the Taiqing adepts deemed to be most important.

In a tradition like the one we study here, nonetheless, ritual is needed to frame doctrines and techniques into a practice. Without the mediation of ritual, the methods would be experiments, and the doctrines would not offer a way of approach to themselves, a praxis that allows to attain to them. As the patterns of emblems of correlative cosmology do in the later tradition of *waidan*, so does ritual in the Taiqing tradition dictate the times of the alchemical work and regulate its progression. From the transmission of the methods to the ingestion of the elixir, all the major stages of the practice are marked by the performance of rites addressed to the deities who revealed the alchemical scriptures, those who should protect and favor the compounding of the elixir, and those who are offered the elixir when it is achieved.

For virtually all ritual forms documented in its texts, the Taiqing legacy draws from the local religious traditions of Jiangnan. To give a few exam-

ples, the ritual of transmission requires the offering of gifts and performance of actions that are also mentioned in contemporary and later texts from the same region. The talismans used to protect the furnace and the crucible are identical or analogous to those reproduced in texts attached to the southern Daoist traditions. The deities addressed in the invocations are also mentioned in contemporary sources that were transmitted in the same area. In particular, both gods mentioned in the passage quoted above from the *Scripture of the Golden Liquor*, namely the Great One and the god of the Central Yellow, are part of the pantheon of the *Central Scripture of Laozi* (*Laozi zhongjing*), one of the main texts on meditation practices that circulated at the same time and in the same area as the Taiqing scriptures.³⁶ Before kindling the fire, the adept invokes the Great Lord of the Dao (Da Daojun), Lord Lao (Laojun), and the Lord of the Great Harmony (Taihe jun); these three gods also appear as a single group of deities in the *Central Scripture of Laozi*. Two of them—the Lords of the Great Dao and of the Great Harmony—are also named in the *Scripture of the Yellow Court*, another text on those practices.³⁷

The close relation between alchemy and local traditions, however, extends beyond the sphere of ritual. As will be shown in Chapter 7, the Taiqing texts fully partake in the belief that other local legacies have in the beneficial action of the divine beings, and share their consideration for the noxious influences that demonic and other malevolent forces play in human life. Relations with the roots of the local southern heritage are also documented by some textual peculiarities in the Taiqing sources. An example is found in a passage of the *Nine Elixirs* whose early date is authenticated by a quotation in Ge Hong's *Inner Chapters*. Here the adept

becomes a divine immortal and transcends the generations [of mortals]. He will be coeternal with Heaven and Earth, and as luminous as the sun and the moon. . . . He will rise into the Void with his whole family, and will fly even though he has no wings. Mounting the clouds and steering a chariot pulled by dragons, he will roam in the Great Clarity and in one instant will tour the eight poles. (*Jiudan jingjue*, 1.11a; see also *Baopu zi*, 4.74)

This passage is almost entirely made of phrases and images shared with—and probably culled from—different poems of the *Elegies of Chu* (*Chuci*), one of the main documents of the early southern traditions: “transcending the generations,” “being coeternal with Heaven and Earth, and as luminous

as the sun and the moon,” “rising into the Void,” “mounting the clouds,” “steering a chariot pulled by dragons,” and “eight poles.” As shown by these borrowings, the Taiqing tradition draws from the same legacy that, about one and a half centuries later, will also provide inspiration to the Shangqing tradition of Daoism.³⁸

The close connections of Taiqing alchemy with earlier and contemporary local traditions are also meaningful for another reason, which concerns a larger segment of the arts of the elixirs and not only those with which we are concerned here. Alchemy, as a rule, does not reject in a radical way traditions, methods, and notions that differ from its own; actually the theological, ritual, technical, and lexical forms borrowed from other traditions provide the elements on which alchemy builds a large part of its discourse and its practice, as the Taiqing texts also show.³⁹ At the same time, however, its own unique way of seeing allows alchemy to graft portions of those traditions, with little or no concern for their original background, into its own body of rites and techniques.

ALCHEMISTS AND HELPERS

The incorporation of elements from earlier or contemporary traditions into Taiqing alchemy is, therefore, an essential feature to consider in order to appreciate the nature of this tradition. But understanding how Taiqing alchemy was associated with the contemporary religious traditions of Jiangnan also requires that we ask to whom the Taiqing scriptures addressed themselves, and to whom the alchemical process was accessible as a path to transcendence. Examining this point throws some light on discordant (but, as we shall see, not necessarily incompatible) statements in scholarly literature about alchemy as a doctrine addressed to the social elite or as a technique performed by specialists, often referred to under the general label of *fangshi*, or “masters of the methods.”

The issue is complex, for the identity of the *fangshi*—a heterogeneous group of practitioners of techniques ranging from divination to healing—and their relation to the higher social strata, including the milieu of the literati both within and outside the imperial court, are not yet entirely clear. It seems sure, though, that while a certain amount of transmission occurred in both directions between the *fangshi* and the literati, their tasks within a partially shared intellectual domain were distinct.⁴⁰ Part of the notions at the

basis of the *fangshi* practices, in other words, also provided literati and court officials, from the Han period onward, with support for political theories and government policies, but the actual performance of the esoteric arts was the prerogative of the *fangshi* alone.⁴¹

The main feature that concerns us here is more limited in scope, and consists in the relation between those who performed certain techniques and those for whose benefit such techniques were performed. The differences between these roles reflect, or even create, social distinctions. Trying to look at early fourth-century alchemy in Jiangnan with this model in mind reveals something about little-known aspects of *waidan*. Albeit limited, the available evidence shows that a “host” (*zhuren*, i.e., the person whom we usually call the “alchemist”) who intended to compound an elixir hired helpers, who are mentioned in one of the received texts as “the person who grinds the ingredients” (*daoyao ren*) and “the person who watches the fire” (*shihuo ren*).⁴² These allusions to the helpers’ tasks suggest that they were the ones who knew the needed techniques—in other words, that they were the ones who actually *made* the elixir. The “host” was the one on whose initiative and for whose benefit the whole alchemical process was performed; he funded the whole undertaking and knew the significance and purpose of the process through the written and oral instructions received from his master. To compound the elixir, however, he relied on someone who held the needed technical skills: grinding the ingredients “ten thousand times,” spreading mud on the crucible, feeding the fire with charcoal or horse manure day and night—sometimes doing all this for months, as the heating process of some Taiqing elixirs required up to one hundred days. Both the host and the helpers, as is stated in several Taiqing texts, had to undergo ritual purifications and to share the same pure intent of achieving the elixir.

Although there are no definite indications in this concern, the two figures outlined above may sometimes have merged into a single figure of an adept who was both a “master” and a “technician.” This indeed seems to have occurred in later times in the broader context of Daoism, when the term *daoshi*, which often occurs in the *Inner Chapters* and other early texts in the sense of “practitioner” and “master of the methods” (i.e., as a virtual synonym of *fangshi*), shifted its meaning to “master of the Dao,” or of “the Way,” where “way” (*dao*) also means “way of doing something,” that is, “method.” The later definition of *daoshi* includes both the doctrines and the

various techniques—primarily, but not only, those of ritual—held by the Daoist initiate or the Daoist priest, who in this sense is the heir of the *fangshi* rather than the “shaman” (*wu*), of the diviner (and the alchemist) rather than the medium.⁴³ In our present context, we should note that although the term *fangshi* does not appear in the early Taiqing sources, the tasks of the helpers were comparable in principle to those of the *fangshi*, especially in their role as “possessors of techniques” or, in Anna Seidel’s felicitous wording, as the people who had the “know-how.”⁴⁴ One can, moreover, suppose that the host’s helpers based themselves not only on specific alchemical techniques, but also on practical knowledge accumulated in related fields, especially pharmacology. If this is true, the helpers’ contribution to the compounding of the elixirs provides a further example of the integration and use of earlier practices into alchemy.

The Great Clarity in Daoist Cosmography

The status of the heaven of Great Clarity, and of alchemy itself, within the traditions of Jiangnan underwent significant changes after revelations of new bodies of doctrines, texts, and practices occurred in the second half of the fourth century, promoted and supported by families (including Ge Hong’s descendants and kin) belonging to the same milieu to which *waidan* had earlier addressed itself. The compilation of the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) and Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) corpora—between 364 and 370, and around 395 to 405, respectively—resulted in a new arrangement of the southeastern religious customs and their historical or legendary representatives. The new hierarchy was codified during the fifth century in the system of the Three Caverns (*sandong*), the earliest traces of which are found in the Shangqing scriptures.⁴⁵

Within this system, which formally defined the identity of Six Dynasties and later Daoism, the heaven of Great Clarity, with the associated scriptures, doctrines, and methods, was ranked below those related to the Shangqing and the Lingbao corpora, bringing about a decline in the prestige of *waidan*. In this new arrangement, which we shall examine with several related incidents and events in Chapters 2 and 8, lies one of the keys to understand the relation of the Daoist traditions of the Six Dynasties to alchemy. The system of the Three Caverns was devised as part of an attempt to incorporate the various religious practices of Jiangnan into a unitary system after the cre-

ation of the Shangqing and Lingbao corpora. One of the main points at issue in this striving for integration, which at the same time was a striving to settle issues of doctrinal prominence, was how to deal with the doctrinal and textual legacies that existed in Jiangnan before the rise of the new schools; these legacies included the Taiqing tradition. Besides this, a different but related problem facing the creators of the medieval religious taxonomy was how to account for the Way of the Celestial Masters, whose cults had not originated in Jiangnan but had come to claim a major place among the religious practices of that region.⁴⁶

The effort toward integration resulted in the ranking of the various types of religious practices prevalent in Jiangnan within a unified and coherent system. While the two higher tiers in the schema of the Three Caverns were assigned to Shangqing and Lingbao, there is evidence—shown elsewhere in this book—that both the earlier and the non-native corpora of teachings, practices, and texts (including those of the Way of the Celestial Masters and the Great Clarity) were at first consolidated in the third tier. This lower tier was formally associated with the Sanhuang (Three Sovereigns) and with one of the main scriptures of the pre-Shangqing and pre-Lingbao traditions of Jiangnan, the *Sanhuang wen*, or *Script of the Three Sovereigns*. This detail not only explains why medieval alchemy, despite the lack of textual connections of its sources to the *Script of the Three Sovereigns*, is often related to the Sanhuang corpus; it also helps us to understand why the Way of the Celestial Masters is often associated with the heaven of Great Clarity, and why Zhang Daoling, the originator of the Way of the Celestial Masters, is credited with alchemical knowledge by medieval and later sources. An attempt to solve this confusing issue in the formal schema of the Three Caverns was made around 500 CE with the addition of four “supplements” (*fu*) to the earlier classification, two of which were devoted to alchemy and the Celestial Masters, respectively. The lower ranking of the Heaven of Great Clarity, though, was now an established fact that no school or movement would question—with the only exception, as we shall see, of the Celestial Masters themselves.

In parallel to the events summarized above, and probably also in reaction to them, new forms of doctrines and practices developed from around 500 CE that relinquished virtually any form of support by ritual and relied, instead, on correlative cosmology. The text that reflected and supported these developments within the alchemical tradition, the *Token for the Agreement*

of the Three According to the Book of Changes (Zhouyi cantong qi), not only became the main scriptural source of new forms of *waidan*, but also paved the way for the emergence of *neidan* as we know it today. The final chapter of this book looks at the process that marked the rise and growth of these new forms of alchemy, and the concurrent decline and final disappearance of the Taiqing tradition.